
A Step into The Past

Book 24

Huang Yi

A Step into the Past Book 24

Author : Huang Yi

All Rights Reserved.

Disclaimer

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain.

All materials copyrights reserved by their respective authors and the associated publishers. Please respect their rights. Works will be deleted upon request by copyrights holder.

Support author by buying the book on your respective country upon release.

Translation by kohchun (<http://www.spcnet.tv>)

PDF Creator by Chans

PDF Created on 05 April 2015

Chapter 01

The Victorious Hundred Battle Sabre

When they reached Jade Orchid Brothel, Zongsun Long father and son are already respectfully awaiting and brimming with brotherly affections. Compared to their initial encounter, it was a world of difference.

This time round, the banquet lounge and the setting is far better than before as Zongsun Long had reserved the most luxurious courtyard Jade Orchid Brothel can offer. It naturally included the companionship of their eight top courtesans, which Lan Gongyuan is obviously part of. Even Madam Orchid had been specially engaged to oversee their gathering.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong who has resumed his original appearance, Lan Gongyuan personally welcomed him. Hooking his arm and leading him to his seat, she leaned towards his ear and whispered: “The last time round, I knew I had hit my mark. Why are you still alive and kicking?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it was brilliant of her to use a casual remark to resolve their enmity into a round of flirting between a man and a woman. He smiled: “Why is Miss Yuan acting on the orders of Tian Dan? Is it because of Qi Yu?”

Lan Gongyuan plainly state: “As a citizen of Qi, Yuan Yuan must contribute my part to Great Qi. On a personal basis, I am full of admiration for Great General.”

Right now, Zongsun Xuanhua who was seated at the second table burst out laughing: “Tonight, Yuan Yuan is experiencing a change of heart and is only concerned with whispering sweet nothings to Great General. Do you think you deserved to be punished with a cup of wine?”

After lightly pecking Xiang Shaolong on the cheek, Lan Gongyuan’s pretty eyes glanced sideways at Xie Ziyuan who is behaving intimately with another gorgeous courtesan. She laughed in reply like a blossoming flower: “The one who is experiencing a change of heart is somebody else. The person who should be punished is Official Xie instead of me.”

Raising his wine cup and chuckling, Xie Ziyuan suggested: “Yes, yes, I deserved to be punished but Yuan Yuan cannot be spared too. However, she can sing instead of drink. Ha!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused. Once he stepped into a brothel, Xie Ziyuan seems to be HIGH despite not taking any intoxicants and is behaving like a completely different person. Nonetheless, witnessing that he is not aroused by even a super beauty like Lan Gongyuan, Xiang Shaolong can deduce that he is just a playacting, harmless visitor and would never be addicted to lust, alcohol or other vice activities.

With reference to the three Famous Courtesans, he does not have an inkling of fantasy towards Lan Gongyuan. The reason is probably his constant deep fear of suffering at her cruel hands. After all, her entire gang of troupe members and fellow conspirators has lost their lives in Xianyang because of him. It would be surprising if she does not bear any hatred towards him.

While he was immensely tempted by Feng Fei, he can feel his attraction for her dwindling after discovering her numerous lies and attempted murder.

On the other hand, the unique and aloof beauty Shi Sufang has piqued his interest and curiosity.

Among the shrill laughter and cheers, everyone raised their cups and toasted one another.

Zongsun Long was seated opposite Xiang Shaolong and was surrounded by a bevy of beauties. After raising his cup and toasting Xiang Shaolong, he wondered: "Why is Second Prince late?"

As expected, no one could answer him. Xie Ziyuan recommended: "Why don't we send someone to rush him?"

Zongsun Xuanhua immediately commanded a subordinate to handle this task. He then turned towards Xiang Shaolong: "I heard from Official Xie that Junior Martial Sister Rou will be sparring with Great General tomorrow. If Great General does not mind, can Xuanhua tag along and witness Great General's amazing skills?"

Secretly annoyed at Xie Ziyuan's big mouth, Xiang Shaolong has no grounds to object and could only reply: "My skills are mediocre and not befitting Brother Xuanhua's proficiency."

Zongsun Long merrily guffawed: "Great General is too modest!"

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is aware that Zongsun Xuanhua has ‘invited himself’ to personally assess his prowess and calculate the probability of him surviving his Master’s sword. If Xiang Shaolong is proven incapable, they (Zongsun family) would have to make other plans because if Xiang Shaolong is slain, all their grand plans would evaporate into thin air.

Leaning towards his ear again, Lan Gongyuan quizzed: “Has Great General met Grandmaster Cao before?”

Xiang Shaolong will not be truthful to her and shook his head. When he was about to say something, three men strode into their lounge in huge steps. One of them was astonishingly Lan Gongyuan’s lover Qi Yu. The other two men are about the same age and were dressed in a warrior uniform and a scholar robes accordingly.

The warrior has a tall and burly frame that radiates with ferocity. With thick shoulders and neck, his face is pockmarked and his eyes are protruding. Coupled with a nose like a lion’s, he can be classified as an ugly man. Despite all that, he exudes an intense masculine aura.

The man dressed as a scholar is skinny and tall, with eyes that betray his intelligence. He somewhat resembles Tian Dan, allowing Xiang Shaolong to easily conclude that he is Tian Dan’s son Tian Bang, causing him a certain amount of shock.

This does not seem like an appropriate place for him to show up.

Zongsun Long and the others fell into a daze, not knowing how to react.

The courtesans are already kneeling down and paying their respects.

Tian Bang took the lead and cupped his hands together as a sign of respect. To Xiang Shaolong, he grinned: “After learning that Great General is here, Tian Bang specially came to have a look for myself. I hope Great General would not hold it against me for barging in.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and returned his greetings. As he shifted his gaze to Qi Yu, the fella’s eyes flashed with a penetrating hatred. The corner of his mouth curling up to shape a cold smile, Qi Yu sniggered: “Seeing Brother Xiang after so many years, I hope you are doing well. I heard Lady (Zhao) Ya died in the foreign territory of Xianyang. This is truly lamentable.”

(For some Chinese, it is considered inauspicious or bad to die in a ‘foreign’ place. Example: overseas, on the roads or even hospital. Many prefer to die at home. Somewhat linked to their ego that they have a home to die in and not die in the wilderness. Therefore, family members usually arrange for their bodies to be sent home before burial or cremation. For Zhao Ya, a Zhao royalty to die in Qin, can be interpreted that she is a jinx.)

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that he intentionally brought up Lady Ya, reminding him the agony of having a loved one snatched away by another man. For a brief moment, his heart was pricking with pain. Xiang Shaolong forcefully smiled and did not answer him.

The warrior’s attitude is even more conceited than the other two. Cupping his fists, he bellowed: “I am Ma Chenjia and I have always desired to witness a display of Great General’s swordsmanship. I wonder if I can have a taste of

your brilliant skills before Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao?"

Zongsun Long father and son as well as Xie Ziyuan were instantly agitated. For Ma Chenjia to openly challenge Xiang Shaolong in this manner and demanding it to take place before Cao Cuidao's appointment, not only did he fail to account for their presence, he is also hinting that Xiang Shaolong would certainly perish at the hands of Cao Cuidao. Nevertheless, given the present circumstances, it is difficult for them to intervene.

Zongsun Xuanhua himself is not a noble gentleman too. He secretly swore that once Xiang Shaolong rejected the challenge, he would stand up at once and issue his own challenge to Ma Chenjia, going all out to take his life. Zongsun Long, on the other hand, has made up his mind that even with Tian Dan sheltering Ma Chenjia, he would still get his henchmen to break both his legs.

Within the courtyard, the tension in the air is electrifying.

While living in the 21st Century, Xiang Shaolong is already a troublemaker in his own right and has the habit of getting himself into bar fights. Now that he has 'matured', his temper has mellowed and no longer finds any meaning in these pointless scuffles. That is why he refrains from fighting and it is absolutely not because of fear.

Now that Tian Bang, Qi Yu and famed Qi swordsman Ma Chenjia are gatecrashing their party with a bullying attitude, Xiang Shaolong can feel his blood boiling but at the same time, he is doing his best to calm down. He simply smiled: "Since Brother Ma is so keen, I can easily exchange some

pointers with you. However, it is not a good time now, why don't ..."

Qi Yu abruptly interrupted: "If Brother Xiang is expecting Second Prince, you can save your energy. Imperial Uncle and Official Han (Jie) just started a meeting with him. I doubt Second Prince can make the time to come over."

Zongsun Long and everyone else were greatly traumatized. Isn't this a clear sign that Tian Jian has decided to throw in his lot with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan? Only Xiang Shaolong is able to decipher the true picture, acknowledging that Tian Jian is concerned that he would succumb to the sword of Cao Cuidao, causing him to place his bet on the wrong man. Consequently, he is temporarily evaluating the situation further and hence, chose to avoid this meeting. Presently, Lu Buwei and Han Jie must be using all their powers of eloquence to destabilize Tian Jian's trust in his current allies.

Ma Chenjia chortled: "Since this is the case, why don't Great General draw your sword now and let me have a taste of your prowess!"

Earlier, Xiang Shaolong has accumulated plenty of frustration due to the betrayals of Han Chuang, Lord Longyang, etc. Now that he is faced with Tian Jian's indecisiveness, resembling grass on a wall that bends in whichever direction the wind blows, coupled with this frog in a well Ma Chenjia who is purposely stirring trouble, he is ready to erupt. He forcefully discarded his coat, revealing his sturdy built that is unquestionably more muscular than Ma Chenjia and snarled: "Since you are so persistent, let's do it!"

Among the crowd, no one anticipated his courageous demeanor and instant reaction to Ma Chenjia's provocation. They were stunned on the spot.

Observing his newly exposed wide shoulders, broad chest, slender waist and long legs forming an incredible physique, coupled with his awe inspiring and indomitable bearing, all the ladies were intoxicated and Lan Gongyuan is of no exception.

Xiang Shaolong is now gripping the handle of Hundred Battle Sabre as he took giant strides towards the centre of the lounge, cumulating into a terrifying and dominating pressure.

Tian Bang and Qi Yu were rattled and they clumsily retreated to the back, inadvertently enhancing Xiang Shaolong's daunting posture as if it was an aggressive dragon coming out of its cave.

Ma Chenjia did not expect him to make his move without the slightest indication. Stuck in the line of fire, he can sense the incoming threat Xiang Shaolong posing.

In this context, it is preposterous for Ma Chenjia to request Xiang Shaolong to back off and give him a break. Coldly grunting once, he took a step back to avoid the advancing menace.

With his rich battle experience, Xiang Shaolong knows that he has gained the first mover advantage and obviously would not let Ma Chenjia regain his footing. Noting Ma Chenjia stepping backwards, he faced the sky and laughed loudly. Concurrently, with a JIANG! sound, he pulled out Hundred Battle Sabre and continued pressing forward.

The moment the sabre left its scabbard, the entire hall became clogged with

a chilling sensation, causing everyone present to be petrified.

Only now did Ma Chenjia remember that his opponent is not using a sword but a weapon which he is unfamiliar with. In his heart, he became even more fearful and had to take another two steps back to give himself the opportunity to assess Xiang Shaolong's attacking style.

Xiang Shaolong obviously would not miss this opening. Swiftly proceeding with steady footwork, he raised Hundred Battle Sabre above his head and simultaneously held the sabre with his left hand as well. He ferociously roared: "Draw your sword!"

In the same instance, Ma Chenjia felt as if he is being overwhelmed by a surge of attacking power and hastily drew his sword.

Xiang Shaolong darted towards his goal and by now, Hundred Battle Sabre has crossed its tipping point and is now a cold sabre flash chopping down on the tangled and disconcerted Ma Chenjia like a bolt of lightning.

If he is a smart man, Ma Chenjia should realize that the best way to resolve this predicament is to continue retreating or even retreat out of the room and reengaged the fight on the open grounds of the courtyard.

Unfortunately, he happens to be the aggressor and was passing condescending remarks earlier. Under the gaze of the crowd, he could not retreat like a cowardly turtle as this is only the first move. Gnashing his teeth, he raised his sword horizontally to ward off the strike.

Conscious that his opponent is defending in a state of panic and is only using one hand to hold his sword, Xiang Shaolong was secretly delighted and chopped down with his full strength

JIANG!

Ma Chenjia's long sword has been severed by the sabre. Amidst the sounds of screaming, Xiang Shaolong has retreated and his sabre has reentered the scabbard.

Ma Chenjia's expression is worse than that of a corpse. Still holding his broken sword, he stood in a daze at the same spot. A new blood scar is now running from his front hairline to between his eyebrows. As fresh blood began streaming down his face, it was a horrifying sight.

Everyone knew that Xiang Shaolong had shown mercy. However, it is even more shocking to witness his precision and mastery of the sabre.

Who could have guessed that one sabre strike is all it takes to deliver a crushing defeat to one of Lin Zi's famed swordsman Ma Chenjia? Even Cao Cuidao himself may not necessarily be able to accomplish such a feat.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked his lucky stars. If he had been equipped with Bloodwave, it would have exhausted much more energy to resolve this issue.

For a short spell, the whole lounge is completely silent.

Ma Chenjia suddenly shouted incoherently and discarded his broken sword.

Embarrassed beyond redemption, he wildly tore out of the room.

Zongsun Xuanhua stood up and raised his wine cup, sighing: “No wonder Great General’s fame has penetrated every corner of Xianyang. Even my Master is stirred into issuing a challenge to you. Such superb sabre skills are rare indeed.”

With horror written all over their faces, Tian Bang and Qi Yu were still staring at Xiang Shaolong with disbelief. Speechless, they were awkwardly standing there, not knowing whether to stay or leave.

Scanning the crowd, Xiang Shaolong could tell that everyone is still reverberating in the earlier scene and that due to a nice coincidence, he had managed to showcase his prowess. Smiling broadly, he concluded: “Since Second Prince is not coming, why don’t we return home and have a early night!”

Barely stepping over the door ledge, Xiang Shaolong was summoned by Feng Fei.

At the upper loft sitting room of the main block, the stunning beauty was facing her zither and staring into space. Noticing his return, she then broke out of her stupor and pulled him to a corner before sitting down together. Feng Fei wondered in a slow and sad tone: “Han Jie came looking for me and sweet-talked me for a long time. However, my heart is already dead and I wasn’t moved at all. This is so strange. In the past, whenever I think of him, there would be this sweet fondness in my heart. Now, I only regard him as an empty shell with a handsome outlook. Why is there such a huge disparity in

my attitude?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and is concerned that Feng Fei may have shifted her affections towards himself. He tested: “Mistress, what are your plans for the future?”

Her eyes shimmering with a pitiful glow, Feng Fei’s tone was remarkably calm. She gently professed: “For the time being, I only wish to live a peaceful and tranquil life. Can Great General please see to this arrangement?”

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a big burden has been lifted off his shoulders and heaved with relief: “After I settle Cao Cuidao, I would immediately escort you back to Xianyang. With my protection over there, there is nothing you need to fear.”

Feng Fei was taken aback: “I know you are an accomplished swordsman but in the eyes of Qi, Cao Cuidao is no longer considered human and is worshipped like a deity. Why are you still as confident as ever? Cao Cuidao’s sword is famed for being merciless. If anything were to happen to you, how do you expect me... how... Aye! Feng Fei does not wish to live too!”

Xiang Shaolong did not misinterpret her meaning, acknowledging that she does not wish to live because she would be helpless after losing him, her pillar of support and is thus having suicidal thoughts.

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not disclose to any Tom, Dick or Harry about his ten-strokes proposal. He simply smiled: “Cao Cuidao is merely an ordinary man whose sword skills happened to be better than his challengers! I am not

trying to prove anything to anyone too. If I do not have confidence in preserving my life, I would have fled with you tonight!”

Half believing him, Feng Fei doubted: “You mustn’t be overconfident. Although the people of Qi often exaggerate their words, it is still an undeniable fact that Cao Cuidao’s swordsmanship has dominated the Six Eastern and Southern States.”

Her gaze trailing to his Hundred Battle Sabre, Feng Fei lightly revealed: “Han Jie is afraid that I would shift my affections to you and heavily criticized you, causing me to despise him even more.”

Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this behavior from Han Jie and is unaffected by this revelation. He chuckled: “Who can be loved by every person in the world? Let them jeer or criticize as much as they like. Yi! Mistress seems to be very interested in my sabre.”

Reacting to his teasing, Feng Fei broke out into a smile, lifting her face and kissing him on the cheek. She whined: “The people interested in your baby are Cao Cuidao and the other swordsmen of Qi. I am only interested in you as an individual. What is the fun in fighting and killing? Nevertheless, you men are the ones who indulged incessantly in it and even got us, the vulnerable women, involved. Before Han Jie left, he mentioned that you might not even survive to see Cao Cuidao but Feng Fei is not intimidated by him.”

Xiang Shaolong grinned: “Do you know who is Ma Chenjia?”

With a voice full of disdain, Feng Fei remarked: “Not only do I know who he

is, I have even met him in person at Tian Dan's Chancellor Residence. In terms of swordsmanship, with the exception of Zongsun Xuanhua and Dan Chu, he and Min Tingzhang are considered the best."

She then frowned: "Why did you bring him up? This man is extremely annoying and his attitude is overbearing, giving me the impression that he behaves with disrespect. Additionally, he imagined himself to be very popular with ladies but personally, I feel disgusted whenever I see him."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I did not know that your love or hatred for men can be so extreme. However, I am sorry to say that you would be unable to see this person in the near future. Earlier, he approached me for a duel and using one strike, I left an ineradicable mark on his face."

Feng Fei was thunderstruck: "Just one strike?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly stated: "Little Brother has exaggerated a little. I did take a few steps too."

Collapsing into his bosom, Feng Fei shrilly laughed: "I cannot stand your self-gratified and irritating demeanor. But you simply chose not to fall for me."

Xiang Shaolong honestly declared: "I did fall for you. Aye! Who can resist falling in love with you? It is just that the burden of love is too much for me to bear. I already have three virtuous wives waiting for me at home and dare not get involved in new relationships."

Feng Fei replied in a unhurried and melancholic fashion: "I already knew and

understood where you are coming from. I am sure the passing of Lady Ya and Princess Qian dealt you a severe blow, right?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “How did you know about it?”

Feng Fei answered: “Of course somebody told me about it.”

In his vast mind, the lovely silhouette of Lady Qingxiu began to materialize. Was she the one who told Feng Fei his past? If this is so, this beauty’s heart is definitely in contrast to her external cold countenance whenever she faces Xiang Shaolong.

Stretching out her lovely hand and stroking his cheek, Feng Fei affectionately suggested: “Great General must be tired. Why don’t you spend the night in Feng Fei’s room!”

Xiang Shaolong was about to reply her when footsteps sounded on the stairs, startling the two of them who quickly separated from each other. Little Ping’er voice resounded from the stairs: “Lord Longyang is here to look for Great General.”

Recollecting his appointment with Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong icily sniggered to himself, wondering what excuse this old friend would cook up in order to terminate tonight’s escape plan.

After Feng Fei uttered a reply on his behalf, she faintly pleaded: “No matter how late you return tonight, please remember to drop by my place. Feng Fei is not asking for any status or responsibility but only wishes for a night of passion!”

Chapter 02

Full Confidence Recovery

Xiang Shaolong squirreled into the carriage compartment and the carriage began driving.

Lord Longyang could not hold back his emotions and leaned half of his ‘petite frame’ closer to Xiang Shaolong. With his ‘pretty eyes’ glowing, he cheered: “Using the excuse that I wanted to admire River Zi night scenery, I have laid my hands on a City Pass that allows me to leave the city. The minute we board the ship and raised the sails, cruising to the west, I guarantee we would be untouchable.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and frowned: “I heard the river route is still blockaded by ice and snow, can we still operate the ship?”

Lord Longyang assured: “I have already sent someone to check on this. Although the roads are still unfit for travelling, since yesterday the river has thawed and boats have begun arriving at Lin Zi from the east. Shaolong can put your mind at ease.”

Hearing his description, Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Is Xiao Yuetan lying to him?

Logically speaking, if Lord Longyang and Han Chuang have joined hands to get rid of him, they should have aborted all their schemes and plans upon

learning that Cao Cuidao has issued a challenge to him. Even if Xiang Shaolong had survived Cao Cuidao's sword, it is not too late assassinate him.

But upon witnessing Lord Longyang's serious demeanor, it is as if he is indeed doing his best to help Xiang Shaolong flee away from Lin Zi. Moreover, the passion radiating from him is something that cannot be falsified. What in the world is going on?

With his friends, Xiang Shaolong is generally straightforward. He could not bear it any longer and questioned: "Isn't Your Lordship concerned about Han Chuang's blackmail?"

His 'tender physique' trembling violently and his face turning ashen white, Lord Longyang stammered: "How did Shaolong know about this?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly indicated: "So it is true."

After a short spell of silence, Lord Longyang sighed: "Marquis Chuang is forced by circumstances as one of his men leaked this piece of information to that traitor Guo Kai. However, now that Shaolong has declared your real identity, Guo Kai instantly degenerated into a state of panic and is at a loss, not knowing whether to proceed or not."

Scrutinizing Lord Longyang's body language, Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Does Han Chuang knows about our plan to slip away tonight?"

Lord Longyang answered: "Of course he has no idea about it. I have sacrificed everything and would never allow Shaolong to perish in the hands of Cao

Cuidao. I have witnessed one of this old fella's fights and his sword skills are truly earth shattering and mind blowing."

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but put his arm around his 'fragrant shoulders, sighing: "Knowing that Your Lordship did not betray me, Little Brother is brimming with joy and my exhilaration cannot be expressed in words. However, I cannot implicate Your Lordship. Please tell the carriage driver to turn back."

Lord Longyang shuddered once and cautioned: "Shaolong need not put up a strong front. According to my sources, Han Chuang and company did met up with Cao Cuidao in secret and advised him to kill you at all costs; otherwise, Qi will never enjoy days of peace. Thus, you must not assume that Cao Cuidao will show any mercy to you."

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: "I heard even the King of Qi is unable to influence Cao Cuidao. Who does that Han Chuang think he is?"

Momentarily stunned, Lord Longyang movingly declared: "I know Shaolong is worried about me but I have my own methods when dealing with Han Chuang. At the end of the day, he has many issues that requires my collaboration and would not dare to act recklessly."

He sighed with another breath: "I am not speaking up for him but he is in a difficult position as well. His friendship towards Shaolong is genuine."

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is not interested in fleeing anymore. He decided: "If I have to leave, I will leave after my bout with Cao Cuidao. In fact, I did

exchange blows with him before and this precious Hundred Battle Sabre is what I robbed from him during that same encounter. Otherwise, how would I come to know that Han Chuang that fella has betrayed me.”

Lord Longyang was incredulous: “You exchanged blows with him before?”

Xiang Shaolong gently persuaded: “Why don’t Your Lordship order the carriage to turn back first? I shall furnish Your Lordship with the details after that!”

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, the sky is barely lighted.

Due to the frosty weather and him sleeping late last night, he does not feel like leaving his warm and comfortable bed and blankets.

Last night, he hardened his resolve and did not go over to Feng Fei’s room because he does not want to lose perspective of the situation by getting involved in another relationship. His grand plan is to endure the ten strokes from Cao Cuidao and get Xie Ziyuan to arrange for him to slip out of Lin Zi. With regards to Feng Fei, he can rely on Zongsun Long father and son to safely escort her away. Based on his standing and that this is not Lu Buwei’s territory, the other courtesans should not be in any danger.

Back in Xianyang, he would refuse to lead an army to participate in any battles. His only fantasy now is that Xiao Pan’s identity crisis is not as bad as what he imagines. However, he acknowledges that this is merely his own positive wishful thinking.

Based on Lu Buwei's intelligence and such an obvious loophole, he cannot always rely on luck.

Out of the blue, the sound of noisy quarrelling can be heard from the front courtyard. Shortly, a man's painful scream resounded. Just as Xiang Shaolong was hugging his blanket and sitting up on his bed with shock, Shan Rou broke into his room and darted to his front. Slamming his chest and grabbing the front of his shirt, she vociferously scolded: "You lazy bum. Get out of bed at once. To think that you are still idling in bed despite knowing that you are facing Master three days later."

Hammered by Shan Rou until their faces are bruised and lips are swollen, Fei Chun, Lei Yun'er and other family warriors stumbled into his room in an extremely pathetic manner. Witnessing the magnificent Great General of Qin Xiang Shaolong wearing a helpless expression on his face while letting this shrew grab the front of his shirt, they were flabbergasted and froze on the spot, not knowing how to react.

With a bitter smile, Xiang Shaolong introduced: "This is Madam Xie whom even Cao Cuidao has troubling managing. The next time you see her, gentlemen should know what to expect."

Rooted to the ground with his mind and body united as one, Xiang Shaolong sliced at different angles with Hundred Battle Sabre, nullifying Shan Rou's fierce and agile attacks with every stroke, causing her to be unable to launch a series of combo attacks. Shan Rou's attack resembles using a sword to cut water into half; it can never be done.

Accumulating experience from the recent years of war, Xiang Shaolong's familiarity with his sabre skills had reached another peak and he now attacks with deadly precision.

After another ten more strokes, Shan Rou is unable to gain any advantage and finally retreated after exhausting herself. Holding her sword horizontally and standing still, she aggressively glared at him with her round, almond eyes.

The spectators of the fight include the band of family warriors, Feng Fei, her fellow courtesans and their waiting maids. Also present are Zongsun Xuanhua and his ten odd followers.

Everyone in the crowd suppressed their urge to clap and cheer for fear of earning the wrath of Shan Rou the super shrew.

Her beautiful face suddenly thawing, Shan Rou giggled with a 'Pu Ci' and laughed: "Kid, you did improve significantly. I shall let you win this time round! I am sure you can hold your ground against Master."

Xiang Shaolong is worried that she would leak out the ten strokes proposal and hastily cradled his sabre and paid his respects: "Many thanks for Madam Xie's guidance!"

The crowd finally dared to cheer.

Drawing his personal sword, Zongsun Xuanhua stepped out to the front of Xiang Shaolong and smiled: "Xuanhua's hand is itching for some time already.

Would Great General kindly grant some pointers.”

Facing this ranked below Cao Cuidao and equal to Dan Chu Qi swordsman extraordinaire, Xiang Shaolong dare not be complacent. Brandishing his sabre horizontally to protect his front, he smiled: “Brother Xuanhua, after you!”

In trepidation of Zongsun Xuanhua’s reputation, the spectators dare not even breathe loudly.

His bearing as calm as still water, Zongsun Xuanhua held his sword and took two steps forward. Xiang Shaolong instantly sensed a formidable sword aura emanating from his opponent and dare not waver. Raising his eyebrows, he moved his sabre backwards.

With his blazing eyes scanning Xiang Shaolong, Zongsun Xuanhua suddenly roared and executed a quick stab.

Xiang Shaolong is stirring with heavy emotions.

Zongsun Xuanhua’s sword skills are not inferior to Guan Zhongxie’s but compared to Cao Cuidao, he is still light years away. It clearly demonstrates that Cao Cuidao’s talent in swordfighting is a gift from Heaven for even his most outstanding disciple is only able to inherit his skills but not his cultivation.

With a JIANG sound, Xiang Shaolong deflected the blow with his sabre.

Reeling from the enormous impact from Hundred Battle Sabre, Zongsun

Xuanhua is unable to execute his subsequent moveset and was forced to retreat.

Xiang Shaolong would not allow his opponent to recompose and prepare another attack. Flourishing Hundred Battle Sabre once, he advanced and attacked Zongsun Xuanhua like relentless churning of the ocean waves.

Zongsun Xuanhua is at a disadvantage because he is unfamiliar with the attacking style of Hundred Battle Sabre. In the meantime, he could only defend himself and took a step back every now and then.

The more Xiang Shaolong fought, the more he immersed himself into the fight, rotating between sweeping moves, narrow slashes, long strikes and short stabs. For a brief period, he even utilized close combat techniques with every sabre stroke forming a killing move, causing the audience to hold their breaths in awe and seemingly forgetting to exhale.

Between the clashes of the sabre and sword, the space between is so minute not even a strand of hair can pass through. The ladies began to shriek and trembled in fear, having the impression that they are fighting for real and are going all out to kill each other.

Only an expert like Shan Rou could tell that Xiang Shaolong has gained full control of the initiative and is holding back some of his strength and prowess. Employing all the merciless moves, he is trying to carve an understanding of Cao Cuidao's swordplay through Zongsun Xuanhua's moves.

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is changing his attacking strategy. Although his

moves are amazingly slow, Zongsun Xuanhua seems to be deflecting them with greater difficulty.

Presently, Xiang Shaolong has recovered all the confidence that Cao Cuidao had frightened away, attacking, defending, advancing and retreating with ease. Every time Zongsun Xuanhua tries to counterattack, he is able to swiftly negate it, limiting Zongsun Xuanhua's potential.

In the eyes of the crowd, including Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans who do not comprehend swordfighting, Xiang Shaolong's sabre moves are ever-changing and comprises of both hard and gentle blows, giving them the sensation that he is the king of the world, dominating all his subjects from high up above.

DANG! DANG! DANG!

Stepping forward, Xiang Shaolong launched three successive sabre strokes, every stroke flawlessly chopping on the same crack of Zongsun Xuanhua's sword regardless of which direction Zongsun Xuanhua wields it. It is incredibly unbelievable to pull off a combo like that.

The long sword broke into two equal parts.

Returning the sabre to its scabbard, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Brother had the advantage of a superior weapon!"

Zongsun Xuanhua is a hero in his own right. Discarding the broken sword in his hand, he boisterously laughed: "Great General holds true to your fame.

Little Brother can put his mind at ease.”

Loud clapping can be heard from afar.

Feng Fei and Xiao Yuetan came up to them and Feng Fei cheerfully invited: “Feng Fei has prepared breakfast, offering our esteemed guests some hospitality. Shall we adjourn to the front hall?”

Everyone went on his or her way after breakfast is concluded.

Shan Rou is rushing home to tend to her sons while Zongsun Xuanhua, who has military duties, is off to attend to his responsibilities. Feng Fei and the courtesans resumed their rehearsal for the birthday banquet which is two days later, leaving the two men Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan in the hall to converse in secret.

In a low voice, Xiao Yuetan praised: “Cao Cuidao is truly a grandmaster and agreed to the ten strokes proposal without the slightest hesitation. However, judging by his appearance, it seems that he has discovered a way to defeat you within these ten strokes.”

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a heavy burden has been lifted off his shoulders. He grinned: “This is fantastic. Regardless of any circumstances, I don’t believe I cannot withstand merely ten strokes from him.”

His eyes flashing with a strange glow, Xiao Yuetan warned after some uncertainty: “You cannot afford let your guard down. Shaolong had better not sheathe your sabre the minute the ten strokes are over. For all you know,

Old Ghost Cao may use this opportunity to launch another two more strokes.”

Xiang Shaolong light-heartedly laughed: “I don’t think so! Old Cao, after all, is a grandmaster and should be a man of his word. That night, he could only stare blankly as I slipped away. You can put your mind at ease.”

A flustered Xiao Yuetan is behaving as if he wanted to say something but could not due to certain reasons. He advised: “No matter what happens, you must promise me that you will exercise extreme caution. If possible, treat it like a Hundred Strokes Agreement or even a Thousand Strokes Agreement.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: “Why is Elder Brother behaving as if you are certain that Old Cao will go back on his word?”

Xiao Yuetan dryly coughed once and gazed at him, honestly declaring: “All along, you have trusted me. Just trust me one more time.”

Xiang Shaolong may be completely baffled but never really doubted Xiao Yuetan. Changing the topic, he updated him about Li Yuan and Lord Longyang’s encounters. He also took the opportunity to enquire: “You did mention that the river route has been blockaded by ice and snow. Is it possible that you had made a mistake?”

With awkward and unnatural body language, Xiao Yuetan replied: “That is what I heard from other people. Maybe Lord Longyang’s news is more accurate than mine.”

Xiao Yuetan then changed the topic: "The entire Lin Zi city is now fervently discussing about last night's incident when you defeated Ma Chenjia with one sabre stroke. Many of them who originally bet that you would lose to Cao Cuidao are now betting that you would win. The odds from one-to-thirteen have plummeted to one-to-five now. Looks like the odds are in your favour now!"

Remembering the gambling fever linked to Guan Zhongxie and his duel, Xiang Shaolong was amused to witness a reenactment in Lin Zi. He chuckled: "Paying five to one is a pretty good deal. Nonetheless, my victory last night was due to coincidence and luck. It is really strange. Whenever I grip Hundred Battle Sabre in my hands, I can feel my confidence swelling."

Xiao Yuetan was delighted: "The way you chopped off Zongsun Xuanhua's long sword earlier was truly exciting, even a miracle if I may say so. No wonder the gamblers of Lin Zi have bestowed the respected title: Sabre King, to you. The title is as glamorous as the title Sword Saint and both titles are on the same par."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I know myself best. I, Sabre King, is definitely not as skillful as Sword Saint. If not for the Ten Strokes Agreement, I would have fled within these two nights."

His face flashing with a bizarre look once again, Xiao Yuetan solemnly counseled: "You must never think like this. Otherwise, you would succumb even before the ten strokes are up. Have you decided on your Lin Zi escape plan? In my opinion, Zongsun Long is more reliable."

Unconcerned with Xiao Yuetan's odd behavior, Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Relax! I believe I have attained a certain understanding of this Sword Saint. Although Zongsun Xuanhua is not as skillful as him, he can be considered a doppelganger, benefitting me to a huge extent."

Pausing, he added: "I already made it clear to Xie Ziyuan and Zongsun Xuanhua last night that I am depending on them to arrange for me to leave Lin Zi after the duel."

Satisfied, Xiao Yuetan reminded: "It would be great if you can engage Zongsun Long father and son to put Guo Kai and company under surveillance. We do not want to walk into an ambush because of our negligence."

Secretly praising his vast experience and well-rounded thinking, Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement.

A servant happened to come in and reported that Boss Jin is here to look for him. Xiao Yuetan took this opportunity to excuse himself.

Xiang Shaolong personally went to welcome Boss Jin. When the latter caught sight of him, he happily chortled: "There I was, thinking that a new hero is born. Unexpectedly, it turned out to be our famed Xiang Shaolong of the northwest. Great General has deceived me thoroughly."

Xiang Shaolong apologized: "I was forced by circumstances and hereby seek Boss's forgiveness."

Boss Jin hooked Xiang Shaolong's arm as they strode into the hall together.

He whispered: "When Great General destroyed Ma Chenjia's reputation with one sabre stroke last night, it has caused a loss of face for Qi. Within these two days, there may be some desperados who will come and create a scene. Great General must take some precautions."

He continued: "There are a band of warriors standing outside but they do not appear to be the soldiers of Qi. I wonder who sent them?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong recall that they are his personal escorts that Zongsun Xuanhua had dispatched. He answered: "They are family warriors from Zongsun Residence. I did not know they had arrived."

Once they got seated, Boss Jin warned in a serious tone: "Zongsun Long father and son are not the law-abiding kinds. Once Great General is no longer useful to them, they can simply turn their cannons towards Great General."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "With my prior experience with Lu Buwei teaching me an unforgettable and excruciating lesson, I know what I am up against. While everyone knows how to butter up to the rich, someone like Boss Jin lending a critical helping hand to the unfortunate is truly rare."

His face turning red, Boss Jin explained: "Great General is giving me too much credit. This is simply my innate character and even if I suffer a loss in the process, I just cannot alter this habit. Oh yes! After Sufang learns about your genuine identity, she was quite upset and pleaded with me to invite you for a meeting with her. Since the last encounter in Xianyang, she retains a deep impression of you!"

Xiang Shaolong was bewildered. All along, Shi Sufang does not exhibit any interest in men. Why is she suddenly yearning to see him?

Back when they first met, it was due to Pu Hu (Po Hu error)'s arrangement. Now that Pu Hu has been executed for treason, it does not make any sense for her to get closer to him.

As per Xiao Yuetan's advice, he should not let his guard down. Choosing not to meet her sounds like a better choice.

Boss Jin added: "I understand that before Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao, you would need sufficient rest and inviting you to a banquet is inappropriate. Why don't we fix the appointment on the evening the day after Great General's triumph victory? What does Great General think?"

Conscious that he would have fled by then, he did not foresee any issues with temporary agreeing to the appointment. When the time comes, he would simply leave a message, asking for Shi Sufang's forgiveness. He agreed with a smile.

After some idle chatter, Boss Jin knowingly bid farewell to him.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was sending him out of the door, accompanied by Xie Ziyan, Second Prince Tian Jian came by unexpectedly.

Chapter 03

Plagued By Gratitude and Hatred

Not knowing that Qi Yu had let the cat out of the bag, Tian Jian firstly apologized to Xiang Shaolong for missing last night's appointment, giving the excuse that his royal father is unwell. Of course Xiang Shaolong will not expose him.

Besides Xie Ziyuan, Zongsun Long father and son, an egotistic Qixia Tutor named Yan Xiang was tagging along.

Entering the hall and seated accordingly to their status, a few pleasantries were exchanged. Finally, Tian Jian, who was seated on the VIP table, praised: "Last night, Great General defeated Ma Chenjia with one sabre stroke; this morning, Great General utilized a special technique, breaking the precious sword of Xuanhua. Great General truly lives up to your fame and has earned our admiration."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand the reason behind him switching sides again. It is because he has proven himself to be somebody who is capable of defending himself against Cao Cuidao. He quickly uttered a modest reply while Zongsun Long and the others are praising him to the skies.

Unexpectedly, this Qixia Tutor Yan Xiang glared at him from the corner of his eye, interrupting: "Presently, in the large state of Qin, who is the real

powerhouse?”

Xiang Shaolong intentionally acted surprised: “Of course it is Crown Prince Zheng. Who else can it be?”

Yan Xiang confidently retorted: “But according to Qin’s Imperial Uncle, as long as Crown Prince Zheng is not coronated, his authority is not official. What does Great General think?”

Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel the entire length of his spine turning cold. This straight-talking and arrogant Qixia Scholar has accidentally spill the beans that Lu Buwei is indeed highly suspicious of Xiao Pan’s identity and is using this claim as a means to win Tian Jian to his side.

If it turned out that Lu Buwei had already sent someone to Handan in search of the couple who raised Yingzheng, it would be a disaster for he could easily topple Xiao Pan or use it as a bargaining chip to blackmail Xiao Pan.

Noticing his change of countenance, Tian Jian quizzed: “What is Great General’s opinion about this?”

His mind processing his thoughts at the speed of electricity, Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and plainly state: “Mister Yan’s words has reminded me about the possibility of someone rebelling. However, the tragic consequences of Pu Bu and the others should be a wake-up call.”

Xie Ziyuan laughed: “Wake-up call? Hee. What an interesting description!”

Yan Xiang posed another question: “I wonder what is Great General’s impression of our Great Qi?”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling tormented as he is not used to flattering other people. He barely managed to describe: “Seeing that Mister Yan can speak in front of Second Prince without any reservations, it clearly illustrates the open mindedness of Qi’s rulers, which can be interpreted as valuing talent. I believe this is also the reason behind the thriving success of Qixia College. These are just my humble observations and I hope Mister does not mind my naive thoughts.”

Yan Xiang nonsensically articulated: “On the south of our Great Qi is Mount Tai, to the east is Langya Hills, to the West we have River Qing and finally Bo Ocean at the north. Thus, Qi is known as the Land protected by four passes. However, with an inefficient ruler, even if he is blessed with vast territory, millions of soldiers and supplies piling up as high as a mountain, he would still be a toothless tiger who is unable to conquer the world. After the passing of Henggong and Guan Zhong, Qi has opened up its communication channels and rewarded those who gave constructive feedback with carriages, exquisite clothing and money, signaling our intention to attract talent all over the lands. Our Great Qi’s present success is not due to pure luck.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is listening to a conceited scholar of Qixia making all the unrealistic comments and having a taste of his shameless boasting. Yan Xiang is apparently still intoxicated in the past golden era when the King of Qi Henggong was building the country from strength to strength. He further observed the burning brilliance radiating from Tian Jian’s eyes, demonstrating his pride in the words of Yan Xiang. Sighing to himself, he

pretended to nod his head in agreement.

Rotating his head (like scholars composing poems), Tian Jian complimented: “Great General is very sharp to note that the success or failure of our Great Qi is closely connected to the prosperity of Qixia College. In the past, Henggong posed this question to Guan Zhong: How can I rule the lands perpetually and how can I perpetually rule without being complacent? Guan Zhong replied:

黄帝立明台之议者，上观于贤也；尧有衢室之问者，下听于人也，尧有告善之挂，而主不蔽也。Be cause of this statement, Qixia College was born.”

(like the songs, the above is some double triple poetic meaning words which I lack the depth to translate and will leave it as it is.)

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own emotions stirring. As royal descendants, they would more or less be fixated on a certain past glory. For example, the people of Qi would quote Henggong and Guan Zhong on a daily basis. Instead of living in the past, they should seek to improve based on their present conditions, creating a new future while keeping in mind the current trends and world developments. Although he mentioned the King of Qi is open to new ideas, it can similarly be interpreted that his authority is weak. During this era of wars, being able to consolidate power, dominate politics and conquer other States is the most critical characteristic a strong ruler must possess. The fake Yingzheng, Xiao Pan, is lucky to be free of these mental burdens of a typical royal descendant. Moreover, he is not restricted by family ties and can focus all his energy into seizing power in order to establish his own authority. Incidentally, he has become the most promising

and wisest King of this generation.

It is no accident that Qin is able to annihilate the other six States and unite the lands. It is partly because no other ruler shares the same background and upbringing of Xiao Pan.

Zongsun Long interrupted: “It is a well known fact that Crown Prince Zheng relies heavily on Great General. Now that the various states are hostile and preparing for war, does Great General have any plans to assist Qi?”

Remembering Prince Dan and Xu Yizhe, Xiang Shaolong is feeling conflicted. Zongsun Long’s words are obviously hinting himself to provide the same guarantee that Lu Buwei is offering Tian Jian in order to wrest Tian Jian from the hands of Tian Dan.

On hindsight, no matter what he says, he can never change the course of history. But for Shan Rou’s sake, he must come up with a commitment.

Scanning the crowd and savoring the looks of anticipation from the eyes of everyone, he officially states: “Crown Prince Zheng is still a juvenile and will only be coronated next year. As a result, he is focusing his attention on internal politics. The construction of Zhengguo Canal is taking up the bulk of his time. With regards to external invasion, he has always adopted a passive stance. One of the agendas of my trip to Qi is to affirm the strong ties between our two States.”

Yan Xiang sarcastically pointed: “Ever since Yingzheng returned to Qin, Eastern Zhou has been conquered, followed by Han’s Munian City and

Rongyang City. There is also Zhao's Taiyuan City who was overwhelmed and became a new city of Qin. Lastly, Wei lost thirty-seven cities to Qin too. These facts do not seem to tally with Great General's statement."

Xiang Shaolong had intentionally designed his words to trick him into making this accusation. He calmly replied: "We all know who is the perpetrator behind Eastern Zhou's military campaign. The other territories were captured by Meng Ao. I guess it is pretty obvious why Meng Ao is able to monopolize control of the Qin military." Instantly, Tian Jian's countenance changed faintly.

Xiang Shaolong's words are actually made up of half-truths. In terms of occupying territories, Xiao Pan, the future Qin Shihuang, is even greedier than Lu Buwei. Due to his adolescence, he could easily shift all responsibility to Imperial Uncle Lu Buwei who, in reality, has no authority despite such a grand title. The recent military maneuvers were indeed drafted personally by Xiao Pan but this information is not known to outsiders.

Yan Xiang is adorably honest and nodded: "Great General is right. Tian Dan is getting muddle-headed in his old age and has failed to perceive Lu Buwei's innate character. Second Prince should know who are your ideal partners by now."

Hearing this testimonial, Zongsun Long and the others are overjoyed. Tian Jian, on the other hand, was feeling awkward and dryly coughed once: "Speaking with Great General is truly enlightening. Hey! After Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao, Tian Jian will host a banquet to honour Great General."

Since nobody else has anything to add, the meeting was concluded. After Yan Xiang and the others left, Zongsun Xuanhua stayed behind and introduced Xiang Shaolong to Yao Sheng, one of the warriors that is in his escort team: “Yao Sheng is born and bred here. If Great General requires any errands to be completed, feel free to assign the task to him directly and you need not go through us at all.” After repeating the same instructions to Yao Sheng, he took his leave.

Scrutinizing Yao Sheng, Xiang Shaolong estimated him to be around thirty years old and has eyes that glow with wisdom. With a handsome face, he comes across as someone who can remain calm and steady in any situation. Hit by a brainwave, he instructed: “I wish for Brother Yao to keep Han Chuang and Guo Kai under surveillance and report their movements to me. You must not allow them to detect your presence.”

Yao Sheng respectfully bowed: “You can call me Yao Sheng. Great General has gained my admiration. This is a small issue and I will definitely accomplish Great General’s mission.”

Finishing, he left to execute the order.

Using this break, Xiang Shaolong returned to his room for a nap. After dozing for about two hours, he woke up and discovered that Han Chuang has been waiting for him for some time. He is certain that this ungrateful fellow must be up to no good again. On the other hand, he has to visit Xiang Shaolong sooner or later; otherwise, it would arouse suspicions about himself.

After he had washed up, he received Han Chuang in the front hall.

A significantly impatient Han Chuang is already pacing up and down the hall. Noticing Xiang Shaolong, he cheered: "Shaolong is finally awake."

Observing that Han Chuang does not display the slightest sign of guilt, Xiang Shaolong was annoyed and coldly hissed: "No matter how long a dream is, one would have to wake up eventually. To think you still have the guts to come and see me."

His face turning white, Han Chuang wondered: "What is this all about? Two days ago, Lord Longyang came and tested my loyalty. Today, Shaolong is mercilessly laying blame on me. What offence did I, Han Chuang, committed?"

Advancing to his front, Xiang Shaolong stared piercingly at him with his shining eyes, accusing: "If you don't want to be caught, don't do it. You are the only person who knows that I am going to Qixia College to steal my sabre..." At this juncture, he detected Feng Fei about to enter the hall from the corner of his eye. Gesturing with his hand, he bellowed: "Mistress, please excuse yourself. I am not through yet with this ungrateful fellow."

Noticing the two men arguing heatedly, Feng Fei was shocked and her face was completely pale. She hastily retreated from the scene.

Xiang Shaolong continued: "If not for you letting the cat out of the bag, why would Cao Cuidao know about my burglary attempt and was using me to practice his sword moves?"

Han Chuang panicked: "This has nothing to do with me. Remember I was

advising you not to go? Aye! How did this happen?"

Xiang Shaolong has to admit that his acting is fantastic. Originally, he wanted to apply the same deceit to Han Chuang, feeding him with lies and fabrications. However, upon seeing this 'old friend', he can feel his anger rising and lost control of his emotions.

Not willing to back down, he countered: "Would you have advised me to go instead? Putting this matter aside, why are you holding secret discussions with Guo Kai over the past few days? And even blackmailed Lord Longyang to get rid of me."

His face drained of colour, Han Chuang stammered: "Lord Longyang told you?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly smirked: "None of your business. If you even try to lay your hands on him, when I get back to Xianyang, I will expose your Zhengguo Canal Grand Plan. The very next day, I will lead an army to raid your nesting place."

Han Chuang shuddered excessively: "So you knew about everything; why did you hide it from Yingzheng?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "Don't you ungrateful fellas get it? Only by building this canal will the Qin military be tied down and unable to participate in any eastern campaigns for the next eight to ten years. It is against my desires to watch my friends become stateless citizens, which is why I resisted exposing this matter and dealing Lu Buwei a blow. In return,

how have you treated me?”

Han Chuang promptly broke down and collapsed onto his seat with hot tears sprouting out like spring water. He grieved: “I was forced by circumstances too. Someone has revealed my meeting with you to Guo Kai and he kept threatening me using hard and soft tactics. But I have tried my best and even hinted Lord Longyang to escort you out of Lin Zi. Shaolong, you must believe me! I have been doing everything within my power to obstruct Guo Kai and in fact, I came to see you today to warn you about him.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that it is impossible for him to trust Han Chuang like before because his acting is simply amazing. He sighed with another breath: “How then, do you explain the sabre theft tip-off?”

With a mixture of tears and snot on his face, Han Chuang wept: “If I was the one who leaked this information, may I die within a year! I am heavily indebted to Shaolong and no matter how heartless I, Han Chuang, am, I would never stoop to such a despicable act.”

Xiang Shaolong reflected: Could it be somebody else eavesdropping on their conversation and overhearing this exchange?

By now, his anger has been appeased and he sat down besides Han Chuang, castigating: “You are a grown man; can you stop crying like a damsel in distress?”

Using his sleeves to wipe his tears, Han Chuang shook his head in a pitiful manner, wheezing: “Over the past few days, I spent all my waking hours

locking horns with antagonists. The pain is almost unbearable. Now that Shaolong has given me a piece of your mind, I somehow felt much better.”

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong consoled: “You should go home! Both of us should spend some time in quiet contemplation.”

Han Chuang cautioned: “There is one thing Shaolong must never underestimate: Guo Kai is in cahoots with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan, going all out to prevent you from ever returning to Xianyang. Qi, after all, is Tian Dan’s playground. If you are negligent, you may fall into his ambush.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “As long as my friends don’t betray me, I can handle any situation. This matter is far from simple, you had better not get involved or Guo Kai may take you down as well.”

He then frostily grunted: “It seems like I, Xiang Shaolong, is a pushover in their eyes. Guo Kai this old thief must be tired of living.”

Han Chuang exhaled a breath of cold air and mused: “I finally had a taste of Shaolong’s unimaginable forbearance and magnanimous attitude. Before your match with Cao Cuidao, Lu Buwei and Guo Kai should be keeping their paws off you. But if you happened to win, the situation will be entirely different!”

Seizing Han Chuang, Xiang Shaolong pushed him towards the main door and hinted: “Go back and tell Guo Kai, tell him that for the glory of Qin Swordsmen, I will definitely have a go with Cao Cuidao.”

Han Chuang was immensely shocked: “Aren’t you planning to flee the city before that?”

Pushing him straight out of the door, Xiang Shaolong smiled in return but did not offer a reply.

After tearing off Han Chuang’s mask, he felt much more peaceful. Lord Longyang is right. Although Han Chuang is no noble character, his friendship towards him is sincere. Greatly comforted by this fact, he was glad that human goodness does exist in everyone.

Currently, he can no longer differentiate between friend or foe. Except for Shan Rou and Xiao Yuetan, he would never place his full trust in anyone else, including Li Yuan and Lord Longyang. Who can guarantee that they may not have a change of heart or are simply lying to him from day one.

This is the first time in his life when he cannot distinguish between his allies and his enemies.

Barely stepping over the door ledge, he was welcomed by Feng Fei. She quizzed: “What is going on between you and Marquis Chuang?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “It is nothing. It is now sunshine after the rain.”

Feng Fei slowly and sadly shot him a look, angrily interrogating: “Why didn’t you come over last night? Am I, Feng Fei, not worthy of Great General’s attention?”

Xiang Shaolong groaned: "It is the exact opposite. I am concerned that after relishing Mistress's enticing body, I would lose control of my emotions. That will give rise to unforeseeable consequences while we are trying to escape."

Putting on an air of disdain, Feng Fei admonished: "Will you stop linking every issue to that? The situation is very clear to me now. Even those who hate you to the core are unable to do anything to you. Since you do not love me, why don't you simply say so!"

Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel the heavy thumping in his head. Pulling her sleeve, he led her towards the inner courtyard and changed the topic: "Aren't Shuzen and the others rehearsing? How can they do a good job with you, First Mistress, giving instructions by the side?"

Feng Fei giggled with a 'Pu Ci'. She chuckled: "You ah... Your best skill is skirting issues whenever they become too hot for you to handle. Now that I do not have a lover, I may lose control one night and slip underneath your blankets while you are in bed. When that happens, I want to see how long you can hold out."

Aroused, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Didn't Mistress say your heart is dead? Why are you suddenly so passionate again?"

Curling her cute little mouth, Feng Fei coquettishly stared at him, censuring: "It is all your fault, trying to seduce me while acting gentlemanly, hugging me when you feel like it and giving me deep kisses whenever you are in the mood. Even your words are amorous and ambiguous. Feng Fei is just an ordinary lady and would naturally seek your love and attention after being

stimulated by you on multiple occasions.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own urges rising but reminded himself that this rare beauty Feng Fei is better left untouched. Fortunately, all his desires for her would vanish straightaway whenever he thinks of her past affections for Han Jie.

He is no longer the same Xiang Shaolong who arrived in this era years ago. Growing out of the age of one night stands, he would now consider the consequences of his actions.

Suppressing his agitation with all his willpower, Xiang Shaolong solemnly explained: “Isn’t our present relationship perfect? Once we are physically involved, the gameplay would be totally different and in the future, you would abhor me for being a heartless man.”

By now, Feng Fei has arrived at the stone steps leading to her chambers. Halting her footsteps, her eyebrows tightened slightly to form an indistinct frown. Seconds later, she displayed a smile, acknowledging: “Great General is right. Once you have obtained my body and yet do not marry Feng Fei, Feng Fei would certainly be resentful despite promising earlier that there are no strings attached.”

Seeing that she is so understanding, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “Why don’t we just limit ourselves to hugging and kissing, Ouch!”

Shoving him away with a push, Feng Fei glared at him viciously before breaking out into a sweet smile and proceeded to climb the stairs to the

upper deck.

Xiang Shaolong had to summon every shred of his willpower to prevent himself from following her upstairs. Turning around, he left.

To avoid getting himself into trouble, Xiang Shaolong chose to spend his whole day within Tingsong Villa. Nevertheless, he could not avoid the provocation of the courtesans. Among his harassers, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen are obviously included and so are Xinyue and Yunniang who kept trying to get into his good books.

Fortunately, he has already made up his mind to run away from here once he managed to withstand Cao Cuidao's ten blows. Otherwise, if these harassments were to continue, he may lose his inhibitions one day and fall into this beauty trap.

In the evening, Xiao Yuetan came looking for him and the two men headed to the garden for a stroll. After Xiang Shaolong described his encounter with Han Chuang to Xiao Yuetan, the latter's face lost colour: "Shaolong should not have disclosed your knowledge about Zhengguo Canal; this may inadvertently force Han Chuang to kill you."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: "Are you sure? He was crying his eyes out and his nose was running. It was a genuine display of emotions!"

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "All human beings are made this way. In the heat of the moment, they would react emotionally but after careful consideration and weighing the pros and cons, they would cast aside all personal relationships

for the sake of their country.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head: “Elder Brother’s words always makes the most sense. Luckily, I need not depend on him. Zongsun Long and I are in a mutually beneficial partnership; he should be much more reliable!”

Xiao Yuetan bitterly smiled: “This is precisely why I came to look for you. Remember Zongsun Heji? He just gave me a fresh update, reporting that Han Jie brought Lu Buwei to pay a visit to Zongsun Long father and son. However, he is not aware about their meeting agenda.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Doesn’t Lu Buwei fear Tian Dan’s wrath?”

Xiao Yuetan coldly sniggered: “Doesn’t Shaolong understand this Old Thief by now? Tian Dan is getting on in years and is no longer the Tian Dan of the past. Due to his early contributions, the royal family is still accommodating towards him. One of the reasons why the King of Qi stripped Tian Sheng of his Crown Prince title is because Tian Sheng approves Tian Dan’s demands unquestioningly. Moreover, Lu Buwei is known for securing his objectives at all costs, even if it includes working together with his past enemies.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “I am conscious that Zongsun Long is no gentleman but presently, I am much more useful to him compared to Lu Buwei. I am confident that he would not switch sides.”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “Do not underestimate Lu Buwei. For him to openly approach Zongsun Long, I am sure he has some compelling reasons. All you

need to do is wait and see if Zongsun Long would take the initiative to tell you about Lu Buwei's visit. From there, you can determine if they are still loyal to you or not."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed, recalling Xiao Pan's identity crisis. If Lu Buwei is using this trump card on Zongsun Long father and son, it is possible that they may switch allegiance to Lu Buwei.

Another critical aspect is Han Jie's unique status. With him moderating the discussion and aligning their interests, it is possible for the impossible to happen.

At the end of the day, Zongsun Long is still hankering after Feng Fei. If he assumes Xiang Shaolong to be simply a paper tiger, this calculative bloodsucker may harden his resolve and commit himself to the unexpected.

Ultimately, the people of Qi share the mentality of the other five eastern States, regarding Xiang Shaolong as the number one enemy. Years ago, Qin General Bai Qi inflicted catastrophic damages upon them. Now that he, Xiang Shaolong, is widely acknowledged as the Bai Qi of today, who wouldn't wish to see him dead?

Based on these fresh developments, his grand plan is no longer viable and he has to reconsider the trustworthiness of his 'allies'.

Even if he is all alone by himself, most of his tasks are still accomplishable. The problem is that he cannot abandon Feng Fei.

Xiao Yuetan's voice sounded beside his ear: "For the next two days, we must brainstorm and formulate a plan to slip away without anyone's knowledge."

Xiang Shaolong realized that the situation must be really deplorable if even this wise and experienced friend is feeling the same helplessness as him. It looks like the best way out is for him to slip away first while imploring Xie Ziyuan to extend his protection to Feng Fei.

The golden question remains: Is Xie Ziyuan able to do so?

Chapter 04

Discovering A Shocking Conspiracy

That very night, Zongsun Xuanhua came to visit Xiang Shaolong. After opening the conversation with some unimportant topics, he quizzed: “Xuanhua is curious about one thing: When the Crown Prince was escorted back to Xianyang from Handan, there were rumours circulating that he was an illegitimate son of Lu Buwei. Even the royal family and court officials were aware of it. However, why did they continue to give him their full support?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly horrified and troubled. It is not Zongsun Xuanhua’s question that he was worried about but the agenda behind the question.

In the past, he was only suspicious but right now, he is fully convinced that Lu Buwei has grasped the Achilles’ heel of him and Xiao Pan. Given Lu Buwei’s prowess, he could easily employ several hard or soft tactics and ‘invite’ the foster parents of the real Yingzheng back to Xianyang from Handan. By then, he could effortlessly use these witnesses to blackmail Xiao Pan.

Thinking about this point, Xiang Shaolong could not help but secretly detest Zhu Ji. However, it is possible that she does not care if Xiao Pan is her own son or not. As a result, for her to reveal this secret is no big deal, which is why it is not surprising for her to disclose this fact to Lao Ai after being sweet-talked by him.

This is indeed the only way Lu Buwei can salvage the entire situation.

If this scandal is exposed, Xiao Pan and him, Xiang Shaolong, would be labeled as conmen. Everyone who is related to or supportive of them would receive the heaviest mental blow and suffer a drastic change of lifestyle.

Within Qin, Lu Buwei is already deep-seated in power. By forcing Zhu Ji to join hands and publicly stripping Xiao Pan of the Crown Prince title, he can then support an incompetent royal family member to succeed the throne, wielding full power over the country indirectly. By then, he can easily dispose Lao Ai, leaving his authority unchallenged.

Although history will remain unaltered, Xiang Shaolong is currently mired in the centre of it all and cannot take things for granted. It is like fate; until an event has factually happened, who can know for sure that it is due to fate? Therefore, his heart is filled with anxiety.

Lu Buwei must have leaked certain clues regarding the matter to Zongsun Long father and son, instigating Zongsun Xuanhua to specially approach him and test Lu Buwei's theories. Once tested, they can make up their minds to switch sides to Lu Buwei or continue to partner Xiang Shaolong.

On the surface, Xiang Shaolong naturally put on a leisurely appearance, concealing the horror within his heart. He replied with a tinge of surprise: "This matter has long been concluded. Years ago, to satisfy Lu Gong's suspicions, a blood test was administered and it is proven that Crown Prince Zheng and Lu Buwei are not related in any way."

Zongsun Xuanhua laughed mysteriously: “I heard the blood of Crown Prince was personally drawn by Great General!”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be astonished: “Brother Xuanhua knows about this too?”

With an unnatural body language, Zongsun Xuanhua replied: “This information was lifted off Tian Dan, provoking my curiosity about another question. It is rumoured that even Qin’s Empress (Zhu) Ji is uncertain whether Crown Prince Zheng is the son of Lu Buwei or the late King; why would Great General have the guts to administer the blood test? If it turns out that Lu Buwei is the real father, what would Great General do?”

Xiang Shaolong is already prepared for this question from him; in fact, it could be due to Lu Buwei egging him to make this inquiry on his behalf. If Xiang Shaolong displayed any signs of hesitation, Zongsun Xuanhua would know that Lu Buwei is telling the truth. It also meant that Lu Buwei could use this fact to topple Xiao Pan. Hence, they should cross over to Lu Buwei’s side of the fence and plot against Xiang Shaolong.

From Zongsun Long’s point of view, it would be ideal if Qin is plagued with infighting and subsequently declined from strong to weak, allowing Qi to have an opportunity to be the next dominant State.

Additionally, if Cao Cuidao happened to kill Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan would have lost a powerful ally and may consequently be defeated by Lu Buwei.

Utilizing all his acting skills to put up a nonchalant front, Xiang Shaolong

casually remarked: "It is simply a smokescreen created by Empress. During that period, Lu Buwei has a monopoly on power and fearing for the safety of her son, Empress deliberately created a confusing scenario. Without a doubt, Crown Prince is the son of the late King."

Zongsun Xuanhua was contemplating for some time before suppressing his voice and asking: "There is something that Xuanhua wants to say but does not know if it is inappropriate. If I cause any offence, I hope Great General will not hold it against me."

Xiang Shaolong could already guess what he wanted to say next and even deduced that it was Lu Buwei who instructed him to do so. On one hand, he could test his own reaction and on the other hand, he could distract him mentally, causing him to perish under Cao Cuidao's sword because of emotional baggage. Xiang Shaolong pretended to laugh: "There is nothing to hide. Brother Xuanhua can speak your mind without any reservations."

Zongsun Xuanhua tried to say something but the words never left his lips. After some time, he finally uttered: "We have a spy within Tian Dan's residence. According to him, Lu Buwei told Tian Dan he has already gathered sufficient evidence: There is a couple who lives in Handan's public housing and they can provide additional information on Crown Prince's identity."

Xiang Shaolong is even more convinced than before that this is Lu Buwei's ultimate scheme. As his heart sank all the way down, his external expression was that of surprise, followed by loud laughter: "Lu Buwei is getting more and more muddle-headed. He must be referring to the foster parents who raised Crown Prince. A long time ago, Crown Prince has already arranged for them

to move to Xianyang. However, this is a highly confidential issue and only a handful of people are aware of it. Has Lu Buwei gone mad?”

These words are simply brilliant. It is as good as telling Zongsun Xuanhua that even if there is a problem, the problem has already been solved even before it arises.

It is now Zongsun Xuanhua’s turn to be greatly surprised. After a short daze, he laughed along: “My sentiments exactly. If I were Crown Prince, I would naturally fetch my foster parents back to Xianyang and allow them to retire happily in return for raising me for so many years.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, accepting the fact that he is not heartless enough to be a good politician. If it was someone else, he would have murdered that couple before leaving Handan, preventing a similar calamity from occurring today.

At that point in time, he did not even consider this aspect and even when he recalled this affair later, he simply brushed it off. This is also because only three individuals, him, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan knows about the couple’s name and address. Unexpectedly, Zhu Ji leaked this information.

Losing the interest to speak further, Zongsun Xuanhua mentioned some unrelated topics before bidding farewell.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is going to rendezvous with Lu Buwei. Hit by a brainwave, he checked: “Will Brother Xuanhua see Official Xie tomorrow?”

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Do you need Xuanhua to pass a message to him?”

Xiang Shaolong made up a story: “I have something for him and have to trouble Brother Xuanhua to pass it to him on my behalf. Brother Xuanhua, please wait for a while.”

Finishing his sentences, Xiang Shaolong swiftly returned to his room and changed into dark coloured clothes and fitted his climbing apparatus. Concealing his new outfit with a coat, he went back to Zongsun Xuanhua and apologized: “I forgot that I have already sent the item to Official Xie’s residence. There is no need to bother Brother Xuanhua anymore.” Zongsun Xuanhua did not suspect anything and left after assuring Xiang Shaolong repeatedly that it is no trouble at all.

Pulling up his hood, Xiang Shaolong slipped out into the streets via a side door. He brisk-walked in the direction of Zongsun Xuanhua’s carriage.

Not only does Xiao Pan’s identity predicament affect his and Xiao Pan’s reputation, it encompasses the life and death of many other families. For the first time, he could understand the dilemma that Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and the others are facing. In the 21st century, only the criminal alone is being punished.

If he got into trouble during this era, not only will his wives and son receive the same punishment but the entire Wu Family Clan and even Teng Yi and Jing Jun’s clans would be exterminated.

In conclusion, the more information he possess regarding this issue, the better can he handle this huge disaster.

Since the beginning of history, gathering intelligence is always the first priority for any army. Since there are no tapping devices for him to employ in this era, he could only personally venture out and hear for himself what are the schemes Lu Buwei is cooking up with Zongsun Xuanhua.

Fortunately, he has been through Special Forces training, making him a professional at sneaking into urban areas. Compared to the skyscrapers of the 21st century, the properties of this era are defenceless playgrounds in his eyes. As long as he can avoid detection by family warriors and guard dogs, he can trespass any residence at will.

Today, Zongsun Xuanhua is only engaging a small convoy, comprising of a single carriage and a handful of followers. As the roads are occupied by numerous carriages driving up and down, their convoy is hobbling along at a snail's pace. By increasing his pace, Xiang Shaolong easily overtook his carriage and is waiting for him at the front.

According to his estimates, Lu Buwei would not be meeting Zongsun Xuanhua at the Chancellor Residence where he is currently lodging.

At the end of the day, Tian Dan and Zongsun Long father and son are at loggerheads with each other. Despite Lu Buwei's overbearing character, there is no way the meeting can be held right in front of Tian Dan's eyes.

Although it is not snowing tonight, the weather is still freezing. Compared to

the earlier nights with snow flying all around, the temperature is definitely much more hospitable. Furthermore, the bone chilling winter wind has stopped blowing.

Due to the thriving economy, more and more politically savvy tycoons like Zongsun Long are emerging. His own Wu Family, Lu Buwei and even Qin Qing are shining examples.

In the midst of his thoughts, Zongsun Xuanhua's horse carriage made an unanticipated stop. Scrutinizing the courtyard in question, the entire length of Xiang Shaolong's spine turned cold.

It turned out to be Li Yuan's Tingzhu Villa which is two streets away from Tingsong Villa.

While the carriage is driving into the compound, Xiang Shaolong has already familiarized himself with the place and entered by climbing over a side wall.

These ten odd courtyards are used specially to host foreign dignitaries and are similar in design. Since he has memorized the layout of Tingsong Villa, navigating Tingzhu Villa is child's play to him.

Demonstrating his dexterities and forte as a Special Forces member, with a mixture of quick darts and slow steps, he made his way across the side garden while avoiding the occasional family warrior on patrol. Ascending the main block which overlooks the front and back courtyard, he landed on the roof about the same time Zongsun Xuanhua entered the building from below, clearly displaying his incredible climbing skills.

Within seconds, Zongsun Xuanhua exited from the other side of the main building and took the corridor leading towards the Eastern Chamber. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly slid down the building with the aid of a grappling hook. Using bushes and trees as cover, he scampered to the west window of the Eastern Chamber. Underneath the translucent window where the illumination of a lamp is barely visible, he squatted down and began eavesdropping in silence. As it is bright inside the chamber and dark on the outside, his shadow would not shine into the chamber. Li Yuan's voice sounded: "Xuanhua, pray take a seat before speaking."

What followed were sounds of tea pouring and someone sitting down.

Xiang Shaolong reprimanded himself for not being thorough in his contemplation. When he first met Li Yuan here, he was conducting a secret discussion with Zongsun Long, clearly illustrating their intimacy.

In addition, Lady Qingxiu did warn him on two occasions to take precautions against Li Yuan. However, Li Yuan managed to utterly deceive him with just a few sentences, gaining his full confidence again and again. It is also partly due to his habit of judging others with an overly positive perspective.

In fact, regardless of Li Yuan, Han Chuang or Lord Longyang, they are all true blue politicians who prioritize benefits and gains over relationships and emotions.

Lord Longyang is probably not as unscrupulous as the rest. But with regards to Li Yuan, it is obvious that he is able to cast aside his hatred towards Xiang Shaolong for snatching Ji Yanran away and work hand in hand with him in

Shouchun. This clearly proves that he values power and status. Anything else is secondary.

If he had succumbed to his laziness and did not stalk Zongsun Xuanhua, he would probably die without knowing the truth behind his death.

Li Yuan is truly intelligent to reveal Han Chuang's betrayal, misleading Xiang Shaolong that he values his past contributions.

As the sound of footsteps of the dismissed servants faded away, it was replaced by sounds of sipping tea and wine.

From the noises generated, it seems like there is more than just Li Yuan and Zongsun Xuanhua in the room. As anticipated, Zongsun Long's voice sounded: "What explanation did Xiang Shaolong offer?"

Zongsun Xuanhua sighed with a breath of air: "The circumstances may be different from what the cunning old fox Lu Buwei has described. Not only did Xiang Shaolong didn't show any signs of shock, he even mentioned that Yingzheng had fetched that couple back to Xianyang. Aye!"

Another man countered: "Didn't Lu Buwei say that he has custody of the couple?"

Xiang Shaolong can sense his entire body shuddering. Besides being alarmed at these words, he was also shaken upon recognizing the speaker. It is none other than Han Chuang who had been cursing himself and crying his eyes out to him earlier today.

In an unhurried tone, another gentle and familiar voice sounded: “Xuanhua, why don’t you reiterate the full chronicles before we draw any conclusions and decide if Xiang Shaolong is lying or Lu Buwei is spouting nonsense.”

His heart sank all the way to the bottom for he could identify this speaker to be his nemesis Guo Kai.

Presently, he can confirm Lady Qingxiu’s implicit meaning and unspoken warning: Li Yuan, Guo Kai and Han Chuang are working together against him. However, he did not expect Zongsun Long to be involved too.

After delving on it, he is certain that Zongsun Long father and son joined their gang at a later stage, explaining their earlier sincere behavior. They probably entered this collaboration after Lu Buwei’s visit.

As his thoughts trained till this point, Zongsun Xuanhua had articulated the chain of events and he added: “Throughout the exchange, not only did Xiang Shaolong fail to exhibit any signs of agitation, inversely, he found the whole affair pretty hilarious. If I were in his shoes, I would definitely freak out.”

Disappointed sighs echoed from the hall.

Guo Kai lamented: “If this is true, we would have lost a golden opportunity to topple Yingzheng. This kid is smart and formidable; his methods are deadly and devastating. With his overwhelming ambitions, we can forget about getting a good night’s sleep if he officially becomes the King of Qin.”

Li Yuan wondered: “Xiang Shaolong is a talent when it comes to faking

reactions and he is blessed with quick reflexes. Could he be actually reeling in shock but was able to conceal it?"

Zongsun Long mourned: "If he hadn't chased away the men that I have bribed, we would be able to find out what is his after-reaction."

Han Chuang analyzed: "Judging from Lu Buwei's tone when he spoke to Master Long, he probably got the couple's Handan address from Lao Ai just as he was departing from Xianyang. Otherwise, Xianyang would have degenerated into chaos and he definitely cannot spare the time to come to Lin Zi. Therefore, I am certain that he cannot guarantee actual custody of the witnesses." Zongsun Long grieved: "In this case, Xiang Shaolong is not lying."

Guo Kai viciously declared: "No matter what, we must never let Xiang Shaolong return to Xianyang alive. Without him, Yingzheng is merely a toothless tiger and may perish under the hands of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. From then on, Qin would be riddled with internal strife and subsequently lack the means to invade eastwards."

Zongsun Long quickly interrupted: "We need to discuss this further. Lu Buwei only wishes to blind him, letting him stay alive to answer treason charges when he returns to Xianyang."

Petrified and infuriated, Xiang Shaolong can only listen on helplessly outside the window.

Han Chuang faintly sighed: "I rather he loses his life under the sword of Grandmaster Cao than to see him becoming a blind man."

Li Yuan calmly reasoned: “The interests of the State comes first and personal relationships do not account for anything. Xiang Shaolong can only blame himself for becoming another Bai Qi of Qin. If he happened to die at the hands of Grandmaster Cao, so be it. Otherwise, we must step into destroy him. Because of his affairs, I haven’t slept well in days. Whenever I visualize tens of thousands of common folks and children of the Eastern States being trampled by the aggressive army of Qin, I cannot help but discard all my feelings of gratitude and friendship.”

Guo Kai warned in a scheming tone: “We must take precautions against Lord Longyang. Unlike Chancellor Li and Marquis Chuang, I don’t think he sees the big picture.”

Zongsun Xuanhua cautioned: “We must execute our plans carefully. If Yingzheng eventually became King and Xiang Shaolong happened to die in Lin Zi, Qi would be in hot soup.”

Guo Kai laughed: “We can simply frame Lu Buwei for it and let Yingzheng focus all his hatred onto Lu Buwei. While they are at each other’s throats, we can raise our wine cups in celebration.”

Li Yuan reminded Zongsun Long father and son: “Second Prince and Xie Ziyuan must not know about this; otherwise, there may be unforeseen developments. I have already gotten Lady Ning to hint Second Prince that his King father is unhappy with First Prince mainly because of his close ties with Tian Dan. Thus, Second Prince should know what to do and Xiang Shaolong is no longer of any use. Moreover, I did make it clear to Second Prince, telling him that as long as Tian Dan stays in power, Qi and Chu will never be allies. In

fact, the outcome has been established. The King of Qi just relayed a new order, commanding First Prince to leave Lin Zi before the birthday banquet. I am sure it is as clear as day what the end result will be.” Zongsun Long father and son hastily responded and professed their thanks.

Li Yuan additionally instructed: “The two of you must do your best to deceive Xiang Shaolong and gain his full trust, misleading him into thinking that Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are scheming against him. Try to arrange for his getaway after his duel with Grandmaster Cao and have someone ambush him along the way. It would be ideal if you can sacrifice some men during the ambush and give him the impression that it is Lu Buwei trying to blind him. That would result in mayhem within the Court of Qin.”

Guo Kai supplemented: “Try to communicate to Xiang Shaolong that Lu Buwei wants to keep him alive in order to face criminal charges back in Xianyang. That would surely complicate matters between them.”

Pausing, he added: “We must keep this secret from Lord Longyang. If Xiang Shaolong learns about this, based on his unfathomable skills, he may clandestinely slip away first. With him alive, Master Long can forget about laying his hands on Feng Fei.”

It is now Xiang Shaolong’s turn to coldly snigger to himself. He has given up all hope on Han Chuang and Li Yuan while doubting that they can inflict any harm on him.

At this juncture, he knows that it is unwise for him to loiter around and he swiftly departed.

His biggest burden now is how to safely escort Feng Fei away. As he does not wish to implicate Lord Longyang, Shan Rou or Xie Ziyuan, the only confidante that remains is Xiao Yuetan.

Chapter 05

Unexpected Gains

Shan Rou wailed: “I quit!” Withdrawing her sword, she retreated.

Resting the back of the sabre on his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Despite raising two kids, Madam Xie can still pack a punch.”

Staring curiously at him, Shan Rou was amazed: “Stop bluffing. Why have you improved so much compared to yesterday? Every sabre stroke is beyond my anticipation.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that due to motivation from his predicament and hurt from his friends’ betrayal, he is now brimming with immense willpower and fighting spirit for the sake of his family and his own survival. He has decided to fully commit himself and discarded all non-related considerations. Treating this duel as a final showdown where he would be staring at the face of death, he managed to unleash his hidden potential.

As per his instructions, the huge crowd that was present yesterday is absent today. Exchanging blows with this beauty who used to be intimate with him, Xiang Shaolong is exceedingly alert.

Since his return last night, he surprisingly slept all the way till dawn. Before Shan Rou arrived, he had already practiced a round of Hundred Battle Sabre Play, explaining his remarkable familiarity.

He is no longer worried about Cao Cuidao's duel that is taking place two nights later. As long as this opponent keeps his promise of limiting the fight to ten strokes, he is confident that he will emerge unscathed.

Now that he is aware of Zongsun Long, Li Yuan and the others who are plotting against him, he is mentally prepared and knows what to expect in the future, increasing his conviction level.

Perhaps now that he has finally determined his friends and foes, and admitting that Xiao Pan's identity crisis cannot be solved by pure luck, all his doubts are cleared and the days of wild speculation are over, allowing him to sleep in peace.

It does not mean that he has found a way to counter Lu Buwei and Lao Ai but his gut feel tells him that history will not be altered and Xiao Pan will certainly become Qin Shihuang. There is no documentation of him, Xiang Shaolong, as a historical figure and naturally no record of him creating a fake Yingzheng. This clearly illustrates the ability of Xiao Pan to protect his legacy but there is no indication if he, Xiang Shaolong can preserve his life in this incoming onslaught.

Somehow, the more Xiang Shaolong thought about it, the more fearful he felt. Luckily, Little Ping'er came by at this juncture, announcing that Feng Fei has invited the two of them to her main building for breakfast. Feng Fei is still unable to comprehend the relationship between Shan Rou and Xiang Shaolong. By right, they should be newly acquainted but their mannerism is too friendly for her to stomach. To her, Shan Rou's lack of respect towards Xiang Shaolong is something exceptionally baffling. After all, Xiang Shaolong

is currently a powerful and popular Qin Great General.

Without Xiao Yuetan and Zongsun Xuanhua around, Shan Rou is even less inhibited. Squinting her eyes at Xiang Shaolong first, she then peeped at Feng Fei before enquiring from her: “This fella is very good at seducing ladies; have you become one of his women?”

Feng Fei was so embarrassed that even the root of her ears turned red in an instant, wishing that she could find a hole in the ground to hide her face.

Xiang Shaolong was mortified at Shan Rou’s broaching of this taboo subject. He chided: “How can Madam Xie ask such a question?”

With a ‘Pu Ci’, Shan Rou giggled: “Why is everyone afraid of telling the simple truth? Just answer Yes or No!” With her innocent schoolgirl laughter, it is truly impossible to get angry with her.

Enduring her bashfulness, Feng Fei resumed her well-versed calm demeanor and replied in a low voice: “The relationship between Feng Fei and Great General is prim and proper and we are definitely not an item. Madam Xie has wronged Great General; He is a true gentleman.” Pausing for a while, she inquired in return: “Are Madam Xie and Great General previously acquainted? It is rumoured that Madam Xie’s swordsmanship is comparable to Young Master Zongsun, gaining much glory for us females.”

Shan Rou was not the least flattered and asserted: “I am who I am, why must I compare myself against men for glory? Hng! I have to go, I have some errands to run in the palace.” Raising her sleeve and using it to wipe her

mouth, she left without even looking back.

Xiang Shaolong and Feng Fei stared at each other with a stunned expression before smiling with amusement.

Feng Fei state in a low voice: “I heard Madam Xie’s original surname is Shan and her family was destroyed by Tian Dan. However, she has now gained the affections of the concubines of the King and Princes who are all begging her to impart sword skills to them. In addition, Xie Ziyuan is highly regarded by the Court of Qi. Faced with her constant and direct insults, even Tian Dan has to bear with her.”

Xiang Shaolong finally learned about Shan Rou’s status in Lin Zi and understood why Zongsun Xuanhua is so accommodating towards her.

Feng Fei continued: “Are we leaving here the night after tomorrow? I am getting tired of Han Jie’s harassment and desire to leave this place as soon as possible.”

Xiang Shaolong wavered on the spot, unable to determine if Feng Fei can be trusted. The fluctuation of a woman’s affections is hard to grasp. Today, she can say that she hates Han Jie but tomorrow, she can leap back into his bosom. If she reveals his secrets, he would have to return to Xianyang as a blind man.

Noticing the change in his expression, Feng Fei had a shock and questioned: “Is there something wrong with our plans?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Does Mistress wish to leave Lin Zi after the Qixia College performance?"

After a short daze, Feng Fei responded: "Since we are leaving, why do we need to wait another five days?"

Xiang Shaolong intentionally answered: "The main reason is for Second Mistress and the others. I would feel more at ease if we leave as a group."

Feng Fei is truly sharp. Sighing with a breath, she observed: "Looking at you hesitating and carefully choosing your words, you must be withholding some grievances in your heart."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that if he chooses to deny, it would arouse her suspicions. Nodding his head, he professed: "I am concerned about Guo Kai. This man is a devil. If we successfully make our getaway, he may vent his frustration on Shuzen and the others."

Feng Fei was astounded: "With Zongsun Long protecting Shuzen and the others, what is there to fear?"

At his wit's end, Xiang Shaolong firmly concluded: "Stop asking any more questions. To avoid any unwelcomed surprises, we will only leave together as a group after the Qixia College performance. Aren't you concerned about their welfare?"

Feng Fei kept quiet and mounted a silent protest.

Xiang Shaolong realized that his tone is too harsh. Shifting forward and hugging her fragrant shoulder, he gently apologized: "It is my fault. I beg Mistress's pardon."

Feng Fei softly exhaled: "Why is Great General is such a bad mood today? This is the first time Feng Fei has seen you getting upset for no rhyme or reason."

Xiang Shaolong thought: How can I be in excellent spirits now? How I wish I could embark on a killing spree to vent the anger in my heart. He was about to utter a reply when Feng Fei admitted with a tinge of guilt: "Feng Fei knows that you no longer trust me because I went to meet Han Jie in secret yesterday. But since we are breaking up, we should at least formally communicate about it!"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect this amazing and accidental side effect from his moody temperament, coincidentally getting Feng Fei to make a spontaneous confession about her meeting with Han Jie. Based on her words, she had initially wanted to hide it from him.

Staring at him with a melancholic expression, Feng Fei slowly hinted: "Does Great General want to know what did he and Feng Fei talk about?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Of course he would say things like you would meet a terrible ending if you choose to side with me!"

Her petite frame trembling violently, Feng Fei was horrified: "How did you know?" Observing her shyness, Xiang Shaolong decided to trick her: "Not

only did I overhear your conversation, I even heard the two of you sharing a kiss.”

Feng Fei was embarrassed to the max. She protested: “He forced himself on me and I was the unwilling party. But it is daytime, where were you hiding?”

Xiang Shaolong continued fabricating: “Don’t you know that a human can easily conceal himself under a carriage?”

Assuming that he is telling the truth, Feng Fei pitifully wailed: “You should understand that I was only trying my best to appease him. Most of time, I was lying to him.”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong recollected Lu Buwei’s visit to Zongsun Long last night and connected it to Han Jie who had lifted the information off Feng Fei. He frowned: “But it is wrong of you to tell Han Jie that we are leaving Lin Zi in two days and are depending on Zongsun Long’s assistance. Doesn’t Mistress know that Han Jie and Lu Buwei are partners in crime?”

With these words from Xiang Shaolong, Feng Fei no longer has any doubts about him spying on her meeting with Han Jie. She explained: “Han Jie belongs to Lao Ai’s camp and he came all the way to Lin Zi because of me. Although he was not upfront with me about his liaisons with Zongsun Xuanhua, my heart did once belonged to him and we even planned a secret rendezvous. It is very agonizing for me to sever this relationship so abruptly.” Shooting Xiang Shaolong a dejected look, she added: “Feng Fei had wanted to borrow Great General as a temporary substitute to forget him but Great General is reluctant to grant this favour.”

Acknowledging that Feng Fei will be an important factor in this tussle between him and his enemies, Xiang Shaolong is determined to win her to his side. He icily laughed: "Do you know that after Han Jie learnt about our relationship with Zongsun Long father and son, Lu Buwei and Han Jie visited them last night and persuaded them to work together?"

Her face whitening, Feng Fei stammered: "Is that so?"

Xiang Shaolong solemnly declared: "Believe it or not. If Mistress continues to feed information to Han Jie, not only would I, Xiang Shaolong, die without a burial place but even Mistress would not be able to escape a dreadful consequence. Han Jie's feelings towards you may be true but a man like him who prioritizes benefits over everything else may painfully sacrifice you. It is impossible to find a magnanimous man among the followers of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai."

A guilty Feng Fei admitted: "Feng Fei is not considered a magnanimous person too. What should we do now?"

Xiang Shaolong resolved: "It is better for us to leave as a group after the Qixia College performance. At Xianyang, you can fall in love with whoever you want but for the time being, you must never reveal any of our secrets."

Feng Fei swore: "I understand. From this minute onwards, Feng Fei will only trust Great General and nobody else."

At this interval, Xiang Shaolong could not think of any use for Feng Fei yet. After dispensing further instructions, he stood up and left.

This can be considered an unexpected gain for Xiang Shaolong. He finally learned about Han Jie being a double-headed snake, in cahoots with both Lu Buwei and the Zongsun Family. If his estimate is accurate, Han Jie may be officially working as Lao Ai's right hand man but has been bribed by Lu Buwei a long time ago.

Additionally, his fidelity to Lu Buwei is not all-embracing. At the very least, he has been hiding his relationship with Feng Fei from this traitor.

How would Han Jie resettle Feng Fei in Xianyang without leaking her presence? He probably has no idea too.

Once a man and a woman are romantically involved, the complication between them are unfathomable and a clean break is often more tedious than it looks. His own relationship with Zhao Ya is a shining example.

Tomorrow is the day of the birthday banquet as well as the first performance. The courtyards are remarkably tranquil and the days of rehearsals have come to an end.

Despite being weighed down by several issues, Xiang Shaolong has to act casual and even engaged Fei Chun, Lei Yun'er and other friendly family warriors in idle chatter. From them, he learnt that Feng Fei had personally disbursed a generous amount of money to each of them as troupe disbandment benefits. However, the majority of them would stay behind and continue to support Dong Shuzen, who is considered more accommodating and approachable than Feng Fei.

Among the courtesans, only Xinyue has chosen to retire back to her hometown. Yunniang has not made up her mind and she is probably waiting for Xiao Yuetan's input.

One of them even hinted at the possibility of throwing their lot in with Xiang Shaolong but was flatly declined by him.

He can barely protect himself and does not wish for others to risk their lives with him. In addition, he would not want to weaken the protective forces of the Song & Dance Troupe. They may be powerless when it comes to behemoths like Zongsun Long but dealing with common thieves and robbers is a piece of cake to them.

Out of the blue, he received news that Zongsun Xuanhua is here and is asking for him. Xiang Shaolong was mentally prepared for this visit. As anticipated, upon meeting him at the main hall, Zongsun Xuanhua started the conversation off with some unimportant topics, such as Second Prince expressing his admiration for him, etc. Eventually, he proposed: "We have already prepared a top quality sailboat for Great General. Two nights later, we would fetch Great General at Qixia College and set sail immediately. Would Mistress be leaving with Great General or would she stay behind and leave after the Qixia College performance?"

Feigning a troubled look, Xiang Shaolong groaned: "This is the source of my agony now. She insisted on leaving only after the successful conclusion of both performances. Without her, how can I leave with a peace of mind?"

Zongsun Xuanhua appears to have gotten wind from Han Jie, knowing that

Feng Fei is leaving with Xiang Shaolong on the same night after the duel. He could not conceal his astonishment and exclaimed: "Haven't the two of you come to an agreement?"

Xiang Shaolong is intentionally wedging a rift between him and Han Jie, sighing: "It was decided some time ago but she somehow changed her mind today. Hng. Does she think she can deceive me? On one hand, she is cozying up to me but on the other hand, she is seeing someone else. She may have her own spies but so do I."

Zongsun Xuanhua apparently is still ignorant about the relationship between Han Jie and Feng Fei. Hearing Xiang Shaolong's words, his face turned pale and he probed: "Who is her lover?"

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong apologized: "This is Mistress's private affairs; pardon me for not being able to reveal him. Nonetheless, it is only a few days delay. I will leave after the Qixia College performance!"

Zongsun Xuanhua instantly freaked out and worriedly questioned: "Lu Buwei has decided to return home the next morning after Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao. Doesn't Great General wish to leave before him?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is still trying his luck and testing himself. He reacted with bewilderment: "What's the hurry? Moreover, I have dispatched a messenger to Xianyang, updating Crown Prince about my situation. I also told him that wherever I am killed, the State which owns the territory would surely be involved and implored him to take revenge for me. I do not believe Lu Buwei or Tian Dan would come personally for me. What they would do is

instigate others to become their sacrificial lambs.” He then coldly grunted: “My Wu Family is packed with experts; whoever that wishes harm upon me had better be prepared to live as a fugitive for the rest of his life. Brother Xuanhua can put your mind at ease.”

With a guilty conscience, how can Zongsun Xuanhua maintain his calmness? Taking in those words, his face became drained of colour and he was dumbfounded.

Li Yuan and the others would not dare to openly assault Xiang Shaolong too. Like Lu Buwei, they are instigating Zongsun Long father and son to be their scapegoats.

Since the battle of Handan’s Wu Family Fortress, the fame of Wu Family Warriors has spread near and far.

If Zongsun Long father and son were exposed to be the perpetrators behind Xiang Shaolong’s assassination, they would face punishment from the royal family of Qi. Furthermore, they can forget about having a good meal or a good night’s sleep with the assassins of the Wu Family seeking revenge on them.

Xiang Shaolong would not let up the pressure on Zongsun Xuanhua. He analyzed: “If I were Lu Buwei, I would get idiots like Ma Chenjia to try and kill me. Once completed, I would purposely leak the information to the public. When that happens, Qin will officially demand Qi for Ma Chenjia’s head. What do you think the King of Qi would do?”

Zongsun Xuanhua cannot help but shuddered once, realizing: “This is truly a devious scheme of Killing with a borrowed knife.”

Xiang Shaolong was amused, knowing that he has finally seen through Lu Buwei’s façade of abandoning Tian Dan. It is actually Killing two birds with one stone. Firstly, get the father and son to kill Xiang Shaolong and secondly, using their crime to get rid of this father and son.

Using this example, they should know that if something were to really go wrong, Li Yuan and the others would push all the blame to them too.

Zongsun Long is not a fool, otherwise, he could not have amassed his present wealth and status. Due to his oversight that Yingzheng and Xiang Shaolong are in trouble, he has lost sight of his main goal and fell into this dilemma.

As Xiang Shaolong has heard of their disloyalty and even eavesdropped on their secret meeting last night, he was able to enlighten Zongsun Xuanhua that he has been used by Lu Buwei, Li Yuan and company, and even Han Jie in just a few sentences.

Zongsun Xuanhua is in a hurry to discuss these developments with his father and is not interested to carry on the conversation. With a panicky expression, he hastily scampered away.

Lifting his arms and stretching his back, Xiang Shaolong went in search of Feng Fei

Unless his guess is off the mark, Zongsun Xuanhua would definitely

interrogate Han Jie, who will in turn press Feng Fei for details.

Since Lu Buwei is leaving in three days time, Han Jie has to leave too. Regardless of whether it is for himself or for Lu Buwei, he would not allow Zongsun Long to obtain Feng Fei.

But because of all these transitions, Xiang Shaolong knows that even if Zongsun Long is ten times more courageous, he would not dare to lay a finger on Feng Fei.

If Zongsun Long were to act against the interests of Xiang Shaolong, Feng Fei will become his incriminating evidence. It would seem logical that Zongsun Long is getting rid of Xiang Shaolong because of Feng Fei.

Out of the blue, light has appeared at the end of the tunnel.

Li Yuan and the others have deceived him thoroughly. He is now turning the tables and giving them a taste of their own medicine.

Feng Fei appears to have given up Han Jie entirely, obediently following each and every one of Xiang Shaolong's instructions. Their coordination was incredible. It was only when Xiao Yuetan came to look for him did Xiang Shaolong finally left the main building. In the side hall of the front courtyard, he detailed yesterday's and this morning's events to Xiao Yuetan.

Slapping his thigh, Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Xiang Shaolong is indeed Xiang Shaolong. With a small mistake by the adversaries, you are able to grasp the initiative. Zongsun Xuanhua is still inexperienced and bared his soul with just

a few words from you.” Pausing, he stared at Xiang Shaolong, quizzing: “Shouldn’t Shaolong be worried that Lu Buwei may locate that couple who raised Yingzheng?”

Xiang Shaolong could recognize Xiao Yuetan’s doubts about Xiao Pan too. However, besides Wu Tingfang and Teng Yi, even Ji Yanran who is so close to him has no idea about it. Indeed, this is a secret that mustn’t be shared, and even Xiao Yuetan is of no exception. Putting on a frank expression, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly replied: “So what if he locates them? Unless Lu Buwei has bribed them to fabricate charges, there is nothing to be worried about.”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: “Actually, Elder Brother has always wanted to ask you this question. Among the letters that Manager Tu (Xian) writes to me, he did mentioned that you ganged up with the senior veterans of Qin Military to conduct a blood test for Lu Buwei and Crown Prince. After proving that they are not related, the Crown Prince and yourself are able to obtain the full support of these veterans in suppressing Lu Buwei. My question is, why is Shaolong so confident that Crown Prince is not the son of Lu Buwei?”

That was the same question that Tu Xian posed years ago and what Xiang Shaolong dreaded answering. Sighing with a breath, he confessed: “I did asked Zhu Ji the exact question face to face but even she herself is unsure who is the father. That means the chances are fifty-fifty that it is Traitor Lu’s son. Given the circumstances, if I were to reject Lu Gong’s recommendation, it would mean the loss of support from these Qin veterans. Therefore, I decided to stake everything in the gamble. Luckily, it was the right bet.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded in agreement: “With one-to-one odds, the gamble is

worth it. Nevertheless, your present scenario is not very optimistic. Although Zongsun Long has been startled by you and would never become a murder weapon for somebody else, you still cannot rely on him.” Pausing, he added: “It is truly a blessing that nobody has discovered the relationship between the two of us; everyone simply regards me as a connoisseur of Feng Fei’s music. The only viable plan now is for you, Shaolong, to leave first. If you can successfully escape, Feng Fei and the others would be safe!”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Feng Fei and the others can come under the joint protection of Shan Rou and Lord Longyang. If the King of Qi is planning to announce Tian Jian as the new Crown Prince at the birthday banquet tomorrow night, Xie Ziyuan’s status would be greatly elevated and Zongsun Long father and son would be doing their best to get into his good books. Simultaneously, Tian Dan would have to take additional precautions against him.

Li Yuan and the others would probably chip in to protect Feng Fei and company, granting Xiang Shaolong this favour. After all, maintaining a friendship is better than creating an enemy. If the Zhengguo Canal scandal is exposed, Han Chuang’s great merit would instantaneously become his great disaster. As a result, it is crucial for him to return safely to Xianyang.

The ever-conniving Xiao Yuetan reminded: “This fella Han Jie is not a simple man. Born into the royal family of Han, he became a top disciple of Cao Cuidao. Appearing to be working for Lao Ai, he maintains a close relationship with Lu Buwei. Because of Feng Fei, he may become insanely jealous and undertake some risks. For example, he could gather the outraged swordsmen of Qixia and ambush you. This is something you must guard against.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “After fighting off Cao Cuidao, I intend to run away as far as possible. It is wonderful that Qixia College is based outside the city, making it rather convenient for me.”

Visualizing the snow skis he needed to make his getaway, Xiang Shaolong suppressed his voice: “Time is not on our side. Can Brother Xiao get his hands on a piece of premium wood for me? I need to construct a pair of snow travelling equipment. When the time comes, you can bury it alongside some food provisions at a place near Qixia College, allowing me to make a swift escape upon retrieving them.”

Xiao Yuetan himself is an expert craftsman. Astounded at his requests, he pressed Xiang Shaolong for the details of the snow ski. When Xiang Shaolong finished sketching the snow ski and snowboard, he was so taken aback that he was gaping for some time before exhaling with amazement: “How did you ever think of something like that? This happens to be the theory behind snow sleds. Leave this to me. Elder Brother will start looking for the raw materials and manufacturing your snow skis immediately. I guarantee that it would be much more ergonomic than your design and they will be completed by the allotted time.”

Xiao Yuetan had barely left Tingsong Villa when Xie Ziyuan came a knocking. He exclaimed with enthusiasm: “If Great General is available, why don’t we take part in the festivities and watch Soft Boned Beauty rehearse Little Brother’s song and dance composition!”

Xiang Shaolong is initially uninterested but recollected that it is a critical strategy to give others a false impression. By behaving leisurely and

occupying himself with performances, it further strengthens the notion that he has nothing to fear and nothing worthwhile for Lu Buwei to expose.

Pretending to be elated, he accompanied Xie Ziyuan out of the Villa.

Chapter 06

Separating Gratitude And Enmity

Aboard Xie Ziyuan's carriage and listening to his light-hearted whistling, Xiang Shaolong can realign his focus and reflect on the activities over the past few days.

When he first ran into Li Yuan at Zongsun Residence, Li Yuan is likely a well-meaning friend without any malicious intentions. When he could not bear it any longer and started communicating with Han Chuang, it eventually gave rise to the idea of getting rid of Xiang Shaolong, a potentially huge threat to their States. How Guo Kai came into the picture is anyone's guess.

They are aware that Xiang Shaolong has a special place in Lord Longyang's heart. Moreover, he had expressed regret at betraying Xiang Shaolong in the past. Therefore, they chose to keep Lord Longyang in the dark about this affair.

Lord Longyang only happened to run into him when he was actually looking for Feng Fei.

When Han Chuang visited him for the first time and learnt about his plans to steal his sabre from Cao Cuidao's Qixia College, he probably hasn't made up his mind to get rid of him or not.

But when Han Chuang mentioned this to Li Yuan or Guo Kai, it inspired them

to make use of Cao Cuidao to kill him. When Cao Cuidao is unable to take his life, Han Chuang knows that he has become the main suspect. He chose to avoid Xiang Shaolong while sending Li Yuan to make enquiries.

Li Yuan is truly clever, intentionally revealing Han Chuang and Guo Kai's partnership and earning Xiang Shaolong's trust. And he himself is silly enough to divulge Lord Longyang's plans to secretly whisk him away.

Lord Longyang is probably conscious that Li Yuan and the others are going to make things difficult for him but is unable to prove it, explaining why he is abandoning everything and leaving Lin Zi with him.

Instead, it was Xiang Shaolong who went back on his word and rejected his kind intention.

If not for him spying on their secret meeting yesterday, this chain of events would probably remain a mystery to him.

Surprisingly, he was feeling hurt but without a shred of hatred.

Because he understands that everyone is forced by circumstances.

At this point, Xie Ziyuan quizzed: "Are you acquainted with Xu Shang? He is originally from Shangcai and is very talented."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Xu Shang had accompanied Lu Buwei to Qi. As they have not met each other here, he has cleanly forgotten about him. He nodded his head to acknowledge their acquaintance.

Xie Ziyuan updated: “Presently, Qi Yu and him are locking horns over Lan Gongyuan. Lu Buwei appears to be rather lenient towards Xu Shang.”

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “If my guess is correct, Lan Gongyuan must have starting dating Xu Shang back in Xianyang years ago. Hey, are you aware that Lan Gongyuan once disguised herself as a serving maid and tried to assassinate me?”

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck: “Is that so? However, she did underwent special training and her skills are pretty remarkable.”

Xiang Shaolong might as well tell him the whole story. Once completed, Xie Ziyuan concluded with a serious expression: “That circus you are talking about must be Bian Dongshan’s Dongzhou Circus. All along, they have been touring and performing at the various States but suddenly, they simply vanished without any news. It looks like the circus members were completely annihilated at Xianyang.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Who is Bian Dongshan?”

Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Among the top four disciples of Cao Cuidao, Bian Dongshan is the best, followed by Zongsun Xuanhua, Han Jie and wifey. Bian Dongshan’s forte lies in his agility and parkour skills, and he is a first-rated assassin. He often carries out assignments for Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “He must have lost his life at Xianyang.”

Xie Ziyuan shook his head, advising: “A few months ago, I heard Zongsun

Xuanhua saying that he has just met him. According to hearsay, he had travelled to the Capital of Yan to assassinate a Yan General. The people of Yan trembles with fear at the mention of his name. Great General may be highly skilled but an assassin's methods are often undetectable. Great General must not be complacent."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "If he wishes to assassinate me, this is the best opportunity."

Xie Ziyuan officially remarked: "On the contrary, while you are here, Great General can put your mind at ease. Bian Dongshan is fiercely loyal to Great Qi and would never do anything that will put Great King in a difficult position. However, it would be a different story if you leave the territory of Qi. The people of Yan nicknamed Bian Dongshan as The Assassin with a Hundred Faces. His art of disguise is unfathomable and unsurpassed. One cannot predict his next appearance or new identity."

For the time being, Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered with Bian Dongshan. Recalling Zhang Quan's theft of the song sheet, he shared the story with Xie Ziyuan too. He added that Feng Fei has composed a new song and even if Lan Gongyuan chooses to perform the stolen song, it would not affect Feng Fei.

Xie Ziyuan was infuriated: "It must be Qi Yu masterminding the theft. He tried to woo Feng Fei in the past but was rejected by her. Thus, he hates her to the core. I will take care of this. I, Xie Ziyuan, would not condone these shameless acts by Yuan Yuan."

The carriage is now entering Jade Orchid Brothel. At this time of the day, the

brothel is not open for business yet and the gigantic courtyards are so peaceful they seemed like an isolated world away from the rest of the city. From the rear courtyards, hints of music can be heard.

The two men got off the carriage and started walking towards the exceptionally grand Performing Hall situated at the rear courtyards.

Xie Ziyuan whispered: "In the past, when the Great King is much healthier, he loves to frequent the Performing Hall for song and dance performances, saying that the courtesans here are much more lively. What does he expect? Courtesans who enter the palace may never get to leave. Firstly, they may unknowingly offend the King and be sentenced to death. Secondly, they may be retained by the King and after one night of passion, be relegated to a harem of forgotten concubines. In fact, there is no difference between the two outcomes."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: In comparison, Xiao Pan's self control is admirable.

Xie Ziyuan sighed: "The Great King has a dream, which is seeing the Three Famous Courtesans performing simultaneously in front of him. He has tasked us with this mission and demands for it to be accomplished at all costs. This can be considered his only dying wish, which allows him to last till today. Otherwise he would have... Hey!"

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended the intricacies behind this grand birthday celebrations. This clearly demonstrates the empty boasts of Qi as well as their culture of instant gratification.

With this laid back mindset, not only has this huge country failed to become the leader of the Eastern States, it has constantly disrupted allied talks which happens to be the only way to curb the aggressiveness of Qin.

At this juncture, a melodious tune filled the air. It was a group of courtesans singing in unison. With crystal clear voices and fantastic beats, Xiang Shaolong was drawn into the music.

Xie Ziyuan proudly proclaimed: “This was the composition I created at the lounge that night. It can be considered one of my best works.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “Does that mean that the rehearsal is ending?”

Xie Ziyuan burst out laughing and crossed the ledge into the Performing Hall.

At the heart of the Performing Hall, there were nearly sixty courtesans who are waving multicoloured dance ribbons, materializing into countless formations, resembling different clutters of coloured clouds encircling an elaborately dressed Lan Gongyuan who was singing and dancing in the centre. It was a mesmerizing sight.

By now, Lan Gongyuan was singing solo.

Witnessing her soft and flexible petite frame bending to fashion all sorts of extreme and enticing dance poses, coupled with the highs and lows, pauses and stretches in the song, it felt like a performance by heavenly maidens, causing the observers to experience the sensation of entering the heaven realm where immortals reside.

Arranged at a side were a group of forty musicians who were playing music and generating a delightful ambience within the Performing Hall.

Besides Qi Yu and a gang of ten odd Qi locals whom Xiang Shaolong does not recognize, the audience comprises of Xu Shang as well.

Once the song finishes, Qi Yu and the others broke out into applause and cheers.

Abandoning the rest of the crowd, Lan Gongyuan approached Xie Ziyuan and Xiang Shaolong. Smiling like the blossoming of a flower, she cajoled: “Why took Official Xie and Great General so long to come over?”

Probably concerned about the ‘Song Theft’ issue that Xiang Shaolong mentioned, Xie Ziyuan apologized before pulling Lan Gongyuan aside and speaking to her in private.

Qi Yu and the others started walking towards him while the courtesans were all paying special attention to him. Whispering and giggling among themselves, they are radiating with passion.

Xu Shang greeted Xiang Shaolong with a military salute as per the laws of Qin. He added with a serious tone: “I have not had the chance to officially pay my respects to Great General; I beg Great General’s pardon for my tardiness.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “This is not Xianyang; let’s keep things simple.”

With an apprehensive expression, Qi Yu peeped at an irate Xie Ziyuan who is speaking to Lan Gongyuan some distance away from them. With a distracted tone, he questioned Xiang Shaolong: “It has come to my attention that Great General is a music connoisseur. How would you rate the previous song?”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that it was Zhang Quan who told him about it. Guilt-ridden, he solemnly state: “Brother Qi must be kidding. In the field of music, Little Brother is just an amateur. However, even to a music newbie like me, I find the earlier song an exciting and unparalleled composition. It is somewhat able to evoke strong emotions in me.”

A well-built and young warrior standing besides Qi Yu interrupted: “My name is Min Tingzhang. I hereby pay my respects to Great General.”

Realizing that he is the acclaimed swordsman of Qi who shared the same skill level as Ma Chenjia, Xiang Shaolong replied that it is his pleasure to meet him while paying extra attention in assessing him.

Compared to Ma Chenjia, Min Tingzhang is much more approachable and has a cultured look. Overall, he is pleasing to the eye.

Noticing Min Tingzhang gazing at his Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong simply untied the weapon and scabbard, handing it to him for a closer look.

The famed swordsman was caught unaware by Xiang Shaolong. After receiving it, he analyzed and toyed with it as the other curious onlookers joined him. Gushes of admiration were expressed by each and every one of them.

The three men, Qi Yu, Xu Shang and Xiang Shaolong were left standing there in silence, leading to an awkward situation.

A few of the more courageous and captivating courtesans advanced towards them, greeting and paying their respects to Xiang Shaolong. After serving him a series of meaningful glances, they giggled and sashayed away.

Fortunately, Xie Ziyuan and Lan Gongyuan happened to rejoin the group. With a wronged expression on her face, Lan Gongyuan appears to have been reprimanded by Xie Ziyuan. However, judging from her body language, she appears to be willing to bear the responsibility for this mistake.

Qi Yu winked at her enquiringly but Lan Gongyuan deliberately ignored him, seemingly venting her anger on him.

Moving to Lan Gongyuan's side, Xu Shang wondered: "Yuan Yuan, are you upset?"

Unexpectedly, Lan Gongyuan stared at Xiang Shaolong, checking: "Yuan Yuan has yet to pay my respects to First Mistress. Is Great General going directly back to Tingsong Villa?"

Except for Xie Ziyuan, the others were flabbergasted.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Xie Ziyuan have such a big influence over Lan Gongyuan. He nodded with a smile.

Lan Gongyuan questioned: "Can we leave immediately?"

Unable to comprehend the situation, Qi Yu and the others are baffled.

Overhearing their exchange, Min Tingzhang returned Hundred Battle Sabre to Xiang Shaolong with both hands, praising: "I heard this unique weapon is personally designed by Great General. It is truly a masterpiece and an eye-opening experience for us."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has won the respect of this usually arrogant swordsman due to his one sabre stroke victory over Ma Chenjia. After giving a modest reply and getting ready to leave for Tingsong Villa with Xie Ziyuan and Lan Gongyuan, Min Tingzhang abruptly invited: "Tomorrow is Qixia College's monthly Sword Meet. Would Great General honour us with your presence and give us, your juniors, some pointers?"

With a look of distress, Xiang Shaolong sincerely replied: "To be honest, meeting Grandmaster Cao under such circumstances is rather awkward."

Another man cheerfully exclaimed: "For the past ten years, Grandmaster Cao has been absent from the Sword Meet; Great General can put your mind at ease."

Unwilling to increase his commitments, Xiang Shaolong gave a superficial answer: "Let's talk about it tomorrow!" Feeling curious, he probed: "Isn't the Sword Meet held on the 1st? Why has it been postponed?"

Qi Yu explained: "It was postponed due to the Great King's birthday celebration. However, this Meet would be even more majestic than usual. Great General must remember to come!"

Someone promptly informed him about the time and place of the Sword Meet.

Not thinking very much of it, Xiang Shaolong followed Lan Gongyuan and Xie Ziyuan out of the hall as Qi Yu and Xu Shang stared at him with jealousy.

Upon reaching the main courtyard, Xie Ziyuan indicated his desire to return to his workplace and cannot accompany them further. Leaving his carriage behind for them, he rode off on a horse.

Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate that he would be left alone with this Soft Boned Beauty. Raising his alertness, he suggested: "Miss Yuan can take the carriage. I will ride a horse."

Shooting him a glare, Lan Gongyuan plainly state: "It has been some time since I rode a horse. Let's give these horses some exercise for their legs."

Yao Sheng and the others hurriedly gave up two good horses. Despite her elaborate costume, Lan Gongyuan nimbly flipped onto the horse like a fox, earning cheers from everyone.

Putting a leg over the back of the horse, Xiang Shaolong and Lan Gongyuan rode side by side out of Jade Orchid Brothel, instantly attracting the attention of everyone on the streets.

Yao Sheng sent four riders ahead to pave the way and divided the remaining riders to the two sides and the back, creating an awe-inspiring sight.

Riding closer to Xiang Shaolong, Lan Gongyuan teased: “Is Great General feeling uncomfortable? Despite all your attempts, you still end up riding and talking with me.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: A criminal reporting a crime. He beamed: “I have not forgotten that Miss Yuan once tried to take my life!”

After a short silence, Lan Gongyuan lightly described: “In this world, there are three persons Yuan Yuan is indebted to. Is Great General interested to know who they are?”

Xiang Shaolong conjectured: “The first one should be easy. Is it Official Xie?”

Lan Gongyuan was elated: “Talking to you is certainly easy, saving me the long explanations. Try and guess the second person. He perished under the hands of Great General.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “No wonder you came to kill me.”

Lan Gongyuan nonchalantly disclosed: “Great General is such a lousy guesser! That person is Xiao Weimou. Yuan Yuan can be who I am today is all because he gave me to a man surnamed Bian who raised and trained me. If not, I would probably have starved to death on the streets.”

Xiao Weimou was actually beaten to death by Teng Yi but he obviously would not mention it. Inspired, he asked: “Is it Bian Dongshan? Now I know why you possess such remarkable skills. He should be the third person you are indebted to!”

Beyond his expectation, Lan Gongyuan gnashed her teeth and cringed: “It is the exact opposite. He is the person I hated the most. I never want to remember the disgusting things he did to me.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Aren’t you working with him during the Xianyang Mission?”

Lan Gongyuan simply articulated: “That is a pure business deal. As long as I act according to plan, regardless of success or failure, I would have nothing to do with Bian Dongshan anymore. Besides that, I am doing it to repay Xiao Weimou’s debt of gratitude. We do not owe each other anything anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air: “It is true that everyone has a complicated story behind them. But the risk you took was too great. Hey, I never thought that Xiao Weimou could perform good deeds.”

Lan Gongyuan dismissed with contempt: “Both he and Bian Dongshan are only attracted by my good looks. Their morals are non-existent. Let’s not talk about them! Can Great General guess who is the third person?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, surrendering: “I cannot even guess Xiao Weimou. The third person would be even more difficult to guess. However, I probably knew this person, right? Could it be Tian Dan, or maybe Lu Buwei?”

Lan Gongyuan kept shaking her head and is grinning happily like a little girl. She concluded: “The guesses are incorrect.”

Xiang Shaolong is starting to find this Soft Boned Beauty quite an interesting

character. He admitted defeat: “I give up!”

Covering her mouth as she giggled, Lan Gongyuan announced: “It’s Xiang Shaolong!” Xiang Shaolong shouted with disbelief: “What?”

All along, they have been suppressing their voices to keep the conversation solely between the two of them. With his abrupt outcry, Yao Sheng and the others turned towards them and stared with astonishment.

Lan Gongyuan gratefully articulated: “There is nothing illogical about it. It is really you. From the time of my assassination attempt until my successful departure from Xianyang the very same night, I was mentally prepared to be captured and executed by you. However, you chose to let me off. How can Lan Gongyuan not be indebted to you? Back then, Lu Buwei also mentioned that the City Guards are all under your command and even he is unable to protect me.”

Dazed for some time, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “You need not feel indebted to me. Putting things in perspective, you are just a pawn who is being used by somebody else to kill me. Executing you does not make any sense to me.”

Lan Gongyuan solemnly declared: “Xiang Shaolong is truly Xiang Shaolong. Chancellor Tian and General Dan may view you as their enemy but they are full of respect for Great General’s integrity. On the contrary, they are full of contempt for Lu Buwei’s character.”

Feeling his emotions stirring, Xiang Shaolong lamented: “Integrity is useless. Presently, who is not chasing after personal benefits? As long as I pose a

threat to their welfare, people are using all sorts of despicable methods to get rid of me.”

With a ‘Pu Ci’, Lan Gongyuan cackled: “It is not often that Great General speaks with this tone. I can tell that your opinion of Yuan Yuan has improved. Using a visit to Feng Fei as an excuse, I was actually creating an opportunity to speak with you privately. Great General must safeguard yourself against this bunch of Zongsun Family Warriors. They are originally a gang of ruffians and outlaws, specializing in collecting bad debts for Zongsun Long. Quite a number of my gambling addict sisters have suffered immensely at their hands. If you don’t believe me, just take a closer look at them. Every one of them is focusing their ears on eavesdropping our secret conversation.”

She purposely finished the last two sentences with an increase in volume, startling Yao Sheng and the others who automatically increase the distance between themselves and the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but experience her prowess.

The Three Famous Courtesans have their own unique points. Among them, Lan Gongyuan’s mannerism is considered the most unbecoming. It could be due to her unhappy childhood, giving rise to a certain style of self-degrading behavior. Although she treats men like playthings, in her heart, she can differentiate between gratitude and enmity, earning Xiang Shaolong’s respect.

Resembling the tingling of bells, Lan Gongyuan giggled non-stop. As she attracted more eyeballs to her, she rode closer to Xiang Shaolong and

whispered: “Does Great General despise Yuan Yuan for dating Qi Yu and other loathsome scoundrels? Aye. How many good men are there in this world? At least Qi Yu is rather handsome and is an excellent sweet talker. Regarding the song theft, I was innocent. Qi Yu even lied to me, saying that it was his own creation.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “That’s the Lan Gongyuan I know!”

With Tingsong Villa in sight, Lan Gongyuan lightly advised: “Great General must not let down your guard against Shi Sufang. She used to be on good terms with Pu Hu and may classify you as an enemy!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I have room for more!”

Receiving Lan Gongyuan in the front hall, Feng Fei appeared to be friendly and approachable. If she is still upset with Lan Gongyuan over the stolen music score, there was no sign of it on her face.

As both ladies scrutinized each other, Xiang Shaolong is having an eyeful as well. As Lan Gongyuan is dressed in her elaborate performing costume while Feng Fei has also put on a nice outfit, he is able to draw comparisons between their beauty.

Despite the insignificant gap in their age, not only does Lan Gongyuan appear younger looking but in front of the cultured Feng Fei who is of noble birth, she resembles a juvenile delinquent.

Xiang Shaolong is probably having this impression because Lan Gongyuan is

here to apologise to Feng Fei. Despite her wrongful conviction, Lan Gongyuan was behaving in a modest and subservient manner, further earning his admiration.

Lan Gongyuan apologized: “Greetings to Senior Sister. Yuan Yuan is specially here today to ask for your forgiveness about the song theft. Yuan Yuan will have it destroyed later...”

Before she could go on, Feng Fei put up a hand to halt her conversation. She exhaled: “What’s done cannot be undone. But today is a day of forgiveness. Now that Junior Sister has seen the folly of your ways, Feng Fei is more than satisfied. The birthday celebration will be Feng Fei’s final show. With this work-related issue reaching a happy conclusion, there are no more regrets in Feng Fei’s heart.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own emotions stirring. From an insider’s perspective, it is amazing that Feng Fei has yet to suffer a nervous breakdown. Going to Xianyang must be the worst decision of her life. She must have met Han Jie during one of the official banquets and was smitten by his handsome looks and intellectual thoughts. Moreover, he is a royal descendant just like herself. Back in the earlier days, Lao Ai and Han Jie were plagiarizing the ladies of Han, therefore, their sweet talking skills and understanding of women psychology must be one of the best. If Feng Fei, Shi Sufang and Lan Gongyuan are the Three Famous Courtesans; Qi Yu, Lao Ai and Han Jie can be considered the Three Famous Playboys.

In Xianyang, an emotional Feng Fei made two life-changing decisions: fall in love with Han Jie and disbanding the Song & Dance Troupe. Currently, not

only has she lost her affections for Han Jie, she will become a forgotten celebrity without her Song & Dance Troupe. The only positive outcome is that she no longer has to deal with lustful men trying to obtain her body. In addition, her fortune should be sufficient for a life of luxury.

Lan Gongyuan was touched: “Senior Sister is truly fortunate to go out with a bang. Yuan Yuan is full of admiration for Senior Sister’s song composition skill and the courage to move on at the peak of your career. What are Sister’s future plans?”

Glaring at Xiang Shaolong once, Feng Fei replied: “I intend to retire at a secluded and peaceful place. Great General is making the necessary arrangements.”

She added: “Among the three of us, I heard Junior Sister has the most tormenting childhood. For Junior Sister to accomplish so much despite life dealing you a set of bad cards, Feng Fei has nothing but respect for you.”

Not anticipating this comment from Feng Fei, Lan Gongyuan flinched. She professed: “Yuan Yuan has learnt that only you can give up on yourself. If you can make it past today, tomorrow would definitely be better. It is Yuan Yuan’s good fortune to meet Senior Sister and Great General today. Yuan Yuan has to go, as Jade Orchid Brothel is opening for business soon.”

With that, she mounted the same horse and left.

Chapter 07

Qixia Sword Meet

After Lan Gongyuan departed, Feng Fei interrogated with disdain: “I heard she sleeps around. Is Great General interested in this kind of women?”

Xiang Shaolong is walking her back to the main building. Taking in her words, he retorted: “Since when did I express any interest in her? How is Shuzen doing?”

Feng Fei proudly proclaimed: “With Feng Fei personally instructing her, how bad can she turn out? Don’t change the topic. How did you get involved with her?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Can you not use the words: get involved? It is so demeaning! Little Brother and her are just platonic friends. She said she wanted to visit you and ask for your forgiveness; can I say no to that? Look at yourself. Earlier, you are so sweet and accommodating towards her, as if she is your own sister. The minute she left, you began criticizing her and portraying her as somebody without any good attributes.”

Covering her mouth as she giggled, Feng Fei warned: “This is how a jealous woman looks like. Since you chose to ignore me, I would not allow you to pay any attention to other women. Otherwise, you’ll get it from me.

By now they have arrived at the stairs of the main building. Xiang Shaolong

was about to leave when Feng Fei held onto his sleeve and dragged him into the building. Turning around, she threw herself into his arms, whispering: “Is Great General thinking of leaving Feng Fei behind and leaving by himself?”

Although Xiang Shaolong is embracing a fragrant and enticing body, his mind is brimming with bitterness. He did planned to make use of the snowboard and slip away first while getting someone to take care of Feng Fei and the others. Unexpectedly, this peerless beauty with her matching intelligence has exposed his secret. He could not bear to lie to her but feared her overreaction should he chose to confess the truth. What should he do?

Raising her exquisite face, Feng Fei pitifully squirmed: “You need not reply. Your expression has given me the heartrending answer.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Do you know that as long as I am alive, no one would dare to lay a finger on you.”

Feng Fei quizzed: “Didn’t you mention that Zongsun Long will protect us?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “The problem lies with your ex lover and his close relationship with the Zongsun Family. I just received news that due to Han Jie’s facilitation, Lu Buwei and Zongsun Long had a two-hour secret discussion. What do you think they are planning to do?”

Momentarily stunned, Feng Fei melancholically replied: “Since this is the case, why are you still abandoning me?”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong mused: “Why don’t you leave one day

before me. I will meet up with you after that. Lord Longyang should be able to make the necessary preparations.”

Hugging him with all her strength, Feng Fei grieved: “Before knowing the result of the duel, how can Feng Fei leave Lin Zi? Fine! Do whatever you want with me. Feng Fei will leave my fate in your hands.”

Xiang Shaolong can fully comprehend her helpless feelings of being alone and deserted. Based on her beauty and talent, all the men in the world would be won over by her. Maybe Heaven is jealous of her accomplishments, letting her fall in love with a scoundrel and crossing paths with himself who is unwilling to fall in love with her, eventually breaking her heart into pieces.

Comforting her to the best of his abilities, Xiang Shaolong finally left for his own room after Feng Fei has recomposed herself. He had barely rested when Zongsun Xuanhua came to look for him.

Seating themselves in the Eastern Chamber, Zongsun Xuanhua started: “Does Great General know that Lu Buwei paid us a visit?”

Xiang Shaolong deduced that he has held a discussion with his father and advisors, deciding that Lu Buwei cannot be trusted and is trying to salvage the situation with him. He naturally would not bring Guo Kai, Li Yuan or the others into the picture.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Even if I did not see it personally, I could easily imagine it. What other new tricks can Lu Buwei come up with? Moreover, Han Jie is your martial brother. Oh yes! What is the relationship between the

two of you?”

Faced with Xiang Shaolong’s abrupt interrogation about his Achilles’ heel, Zongsun Xuanhua freaked out on the spot. He stammered: “Our relationship is not clearly defined but we are definitely acquainted.”

Xiang Shaolong openly declared: “Compared to Lu Buwei, Han Jie should be more eager to kill me. This is because Lu Buwei assumes that he has a trump card that would cause my complete downfall. Han Jie should be insanely jealous of me and an insane man would act without thinking twice about the consequences.”

Zongsun Xuanhua is no fool and he already guessed that Feng Fei’s lover is Han Jie; otherwise, why would he be so familiar with Feng Fei’s activities? His face losing colour, he lowered his head to conceal it. As he stared at the floor, he probed with a deep voice: “Has Great General decided on your departure date?”

Xiang Shaolong is highly amused, knowing that through his intricate scheming, he has caused both father and son to lose their bearings. He somberly remarked: “After careful consideration, I would officially bid farewell to your Great King and Second Prince. At the same time, I would request for soldiers to protect me and openly parade back to Qin. It is way better than sneaking around and becoming a lightning rod for rumours.”

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Xuanhua fully agrees. Great General can seek Official Xie’s assistance in relaying the message. I guarantee that everything will be well-arranged.”

With these sentences, Xiang Shaolong knows that Zongsun Long father and son would not dare to participate in any more anti-Xiang Shaolong schemes after weighing the pros and cons.

If Xiang Shaolong is sent home by Qi's official escort, both Li Yuan's team and Lu Buwei's team would lack the grounds to instigate Zongsun Long father and son to assassinate him.

Nevertheless, this is not an ideal outcome. The King of Qi cannot afford to dispatch an army to escort him. Moreover, there may be spies within the escort team. With these unknown factors, it would be a miracle if he can travel safely through Chu and the Three States.

The Qi escorts would not serve him wholeheartedly. If they run into trouble, they would scatter like mice.

But in Feng Fei's case, this would be an excellent arrangement. He made a mental note to approach Tian Jian about this. Hopefully, this would relieve him of this pressing issue.

Zongsun Xuanhua frowned: "Min Tingzhang came to see me earlier, saying that Great General has agreed to participate in the Sword Meet tomorrow. I have been doing my best to reject these meaningless appointments. Why did Great General give him your consent?"

Xiang Shaolong refuted: "I did not give him my consent. I only gave a perfunctory reply, saying that I will think about it!"

Zongsun Xuanhua was incensed: “This fellow is getting out of hand and even dared to overstep his boundaries. I must teach him a lesson.”

Xiang Shaolong assured: “Relax! There is no reason for me to go too.”

Zongsun Xuanhua swore: “Actually, there is no harm going. Whoever dares to cross Great General’s path would have to deal with me first. Xuanhua will warn all those frog-in-the-well fellows that whoever is upset with Great General, it is as good as being upset with me, Zongsun Xuanhua.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is trying to make up for his earlier mistake by flattering himself. He casually dismissed: “Let’s see what happens tomorrow!”

Zongsun Xuanhua suggested: “Tonight...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him: “It is not appropriate for me to indulge in night activities. Otherwise, I would lack the vitality to deal with Grandmaster Cao’s saintly sword.”

Zongsun Xuanhua can detect that Xiang Shaolong is no longer as friendly and trusting as before, recognizing that Lu Buwei’s issue has cast a shadow over their relationship. Stuck without a choice, he left dejectedly.

After carefully studying his options, Xiang Shaolong sent a messenger to invite Xie Ziyuan over. He went straight to the point: “Little Brother has something that requires Brother Xie’s assistance.”

Xie Ziyuan was overjoyed: “You can count on me. Brother Xiang can speak without reservations.”

Xiang Shaolong honestly explained the whole scenario, as he is concerned that any misunderstandings would result in unnecessary troubles. The only thing he held back was Zongsun Long father and son ganging up with Li Yuan and company. He only hinted that the people of Chu and the Three States are not reliable, for they are secretly planning to increase the hostility between Qin and Qi.

Exhaling a breath of cold air at the end of his lecture, Xie Ziyuan was disappointed: “Doesn’t Zongsun Long understand the intentions of the Great King and Second Prince? Even a fool can tell that Lu Buwei would have a terrible ending.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “On the surface, you must pretend that everything is normal. Privately, please inform Second Prince that I may leave without saying goodbye and beseech him to take care of Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the others.”

Patting his chest, Xie Ziyuan agreed: “You can count on Little Brother. After Brother Xiang’s departure, I will advise Second Prince to offer them temporary residence within the palace. Once everything has died down, I would send them over to Xianyang.”

His face revealing an expression of reluctance, Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Without Brother Xiang, life would be less exciting.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Are you afraid that you cannot fool around anymore?”

His face turning red, Xie Ziyuan prayed: “Wifey is much more lenient with Little Brother now. It would be wonderful if she can maintain this attitude even after the departure of Brother Xiang.”

Several jokes and conversations later, Xie Ziyuan took his leave.

Next, Xiang Shaolong looked for Dong Shuzen. After giving her the necessary instructions, the eyes of Dong Shuzen began to turn red. In a flustered tone, she wailed: “Right now, we are so worried about your duel with Cao Cuidao two nights later.”

Xiang Shaolong can understand where she is coming from, as he seems to be reading out his will through the instructions that he gave her. By planning all their future activities, it sounded inauspicious. Luckily, he is confident that he would survive the duel with Cao Cuidao. With a smile, he consoled her: “Everyone would have to face different challenges in life. Your top priority is to train hard for your performances. In the future, you must come to Xianyang and perform for me.”

A grateful Dong Shuzen leapt into his bosom.

Embracing her alluring body, this is the first time Xiang Shaolong could feel the absence of all sexual connotations. What he felt instead was an awesome borderless friendship that surpasses the kind of love between a man and a woman. Due to his past restraints, he was rewarded with this

mind-blowing sensation.

Within his heart, an immense fighting spirit began to stir. For his loved ones and for himself, he would fight till the end, never giving up and never surrendering.

That night, everyone from the Song & Dance Troupe gathered in the main hall for a pre-celebration. Regardless of their status, every person is exhibiting their support and enthusiasm for the Troupe, unlike the fearful and selfish behavior that was witnessed earlier.

During the banquet, Xiang Shaolong officially announced that he would be inviting the Dong Shuzen-inherited Song & Dance Troupe to Xianyang for a performance. All expenses will be borne by his Wu Family, much to the delight of the crowd.

Although Feng Fei is no longer actively involved, she was enjoying herself too.

With Xiang Shaolong's support, it is the equivalent of providing the Song & Dance Troupe with a reliable backer. This is highly beneficial for the standing of the Troupe. The only shadow looming over the celebration is Xiang Shaolong's duel with Cao Cuidao two days later. Of course nobody dares to mention this.

Many people are wasted that night, including Feng Fei.

Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, did not touch a single drop of wine. After carrying Feng Fei back to her room, he went to the rear garden all by himself

to practice his Sabre skills.

He can feel his cultivation of the sabre improving by leaps and bounds.

This was forced by Cao Cuidao.

After exchanging blows with this earth-shattering grandmaster swordsman, he caught a glimpse of an unimaginable level of martial arts that he never thought existed. With the mind and the sword combined as one united force, the pressure radiating from this stance is several times more powerful than one who is fighting with ferocity or kamikaze adrenaline.

In the past, Xiang Shaolong is able to overcome other swordsmen mainly because of his deep knowledge of Mozi Swordplay Meditation, on top of his physical health and innate strength. During the duel, he is able to maintain absolute calmness and display the essence of the swordplay.

Cao Cuidao has unknowingly aroused his willpower, confidence and an indescribable type of mental and physical strength combination. This newfound aura is critical to one's victory in battle.

That night, he meditated for an hour before retiring to bed. Sleeping all the way till dawn, he woke up fully rejuvenated and felt so powerful that he can kill a tiger with his bare hands. Proceeding to the garden, he did some warm up exercises before starting to practice his sabre once again.

Recalling that day when he scored victory with one sabre stroke, causing Ma Chenjia to discard his weapon and flee, he realized that besides mastering

the precision of the attack, the main reason behind his success was that he was holding the sabre with both hands. By following a samurai attacking style, the strength of his blow would increase by several folds.

He can feel a sense of excitement surging within him, thinking that this may be the only way to counter Cao Cuidao's colossal strength.

Finding the appropriate time and method to execute it is vital to its success.

With a mere ten strokes, he does not believe he cannot withstand the blows.

Even if Cao Cuidao has three heads and six arms, he would be able to counter him with his sabre and scabbard combination. Moreover, the ten strokes will be over in a flash.

Remembering the earlier days when he was depressed and despondent, lacking confidence in even handling the ten strokes, he could not help but feel amused. Deep inside, he was deeply grateful towards his good buddy Xiao Yuetan.

His earlier notions of fear and escape have disappeared without a trace.

Now that he has completed all his preparations, he looks forward to face Cao Cuidao tomorrow night with an undistracted mind. At the end of the duel, he would make use of the cover of the night to make good his escape, heading back to Xianyang to reunite with his wives and son.

With this formidable foe exerting pressure on him, Xiang Shaolong can

literally feel himself unleashing his hidden potential as he practice his moves. With every strike, he can experience himself reaching another peak in his mind. It was a surreal sensation that he had never encountered before.

Out of the blue, he felt as if he is in the centre of a massacre. As his men collapsed one by one around him, followed by Zhou Liang tragically dying in front of his eyes and King Eagle attacking the enemy to avenge its master, his mind was crammed with feelings of grief and anger.

Recalling his friends who had betrayed or abandoned him due to differences in loyalty, he came to the conclusion that while all things may change, the Hundred Battle Sabre in his hand would forever serve as a trusty companion.

He released a weak slash.

Time seemed to have stopped still.

Shan Rou's voice sounded from his back: "I'm not fighting you today! You are becoming more and more powerful."

Returning the sabre back into the scabbard, Xiang Shaolong came to Shan Rou's side, jesting: "I thought Elder Sister Rou does not know the meaning of fear?"

Shan Rou elbowed an area near his waist, causing him to cry out in pain. She cursed: "To hell with your nonsense. Outside the Villa, Min Tingzhang and the others are awaiting your esteemed arrival, ready to escort you to Qixia College to attend the Sword Meet. If not for them, I would have kicked you

all the way back to Xianyang.”

Rubbing the painful bruise, Xiang Shaolong pleaded: “I have to trouble you to tell them that I am planning to stay indoors today, conserving my energy...”

Shan Rou interrupted him: “You are not allowed to back out. I am all excited and looking for someone to be my punching bag. Tell you what, you can tag along with me to join the festivities.”

Before Xiang Shaolong can recover from his daze, Shan Rou is dragging him so hard that he stumbled along.

More than five hundred Qixia Swordsmen are performing the opening formation named Sword Salute.

Their movements are well synchronized and neat, resulting in an awesome performance.

Xiang Shaolong is seated at the VIP seats of the college parade square. On his right is Tian Jian, followed by Lu Buwei, while Tian Dan is seated on his left. Shan Rou has somewhat disappeared into the crowds.

Each and every one of Lin Zi’s rich and famous, officials, minsters and even the royal family were in full attendance. It was a grand and imposing sight.

There are plenty of warriors and commoners who are here to join in the festivities. With at least four thousand of them in attendance, they filled the four corners of the parade square to the brim.

At the end of the Sword Salute display, Tian Jian enthusiastically represented King Qixiang in reading out the rules of the Meet. A Qixia Tutor himself, Zongsun Xuanhua led a pack of several Tutors and swordsmen into the parade square, simultaneously conducting tests for swordsmanship, riding and archery. Min Tingzhang is a Tutor too and wasted no time in showcasing his abilities.

Seated on the other side of Tian Dan is Xie Ziyuan. Skipping Tian Dan who is in between them, he winked at Xiang Shaolong, indicating the smooth execution of his requests.

Lu Buwei who was chatting with Tian Jian suddenly leaned closer and proposed: "Let me escort Shaolong to Qixia College tomorrow evening! This matter concerns the glory of our Great Qin, we must have a decent entourage."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: You can come, but I would certainly slip away and make you lose face in front of your men. Smiling in return, he could not be bothered with him.

Unexpectedly, Tian Jian overheard this exchange and interrupted: "Let me and Imperial Uncle escort Great General together, giving him a boost of courage."

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself and helplessly agreed.

On the other side, Tian Dan chortled: "By now, First Mistress should have entered the palace in preparation for tonight's performance!"

Xiang Shaolong found it hilarious, recognizing that he is trying to make small talk. Muttering a reply, he turned his attention back to the parade square. Coincidentally, a warrior happened to hit the bull's eye on a target two hundred steps away, earning a series of wild cheers.

Compared to the ambience of Qin's Hunting Fair, the Qixia Sword Meet is much more inferior, illustrating the pathetic culture of martial arts in Qi vis a vis Qin.

At this juncture, someone came to Tian Dan's side and whispered a few sentences to him.

After the man left, Tian Dan faced Lu Buwei and chuckled: "There is a challenger who is interested in dueling Imperial Uncle's Shangcai Number One Swordsman. I wonder if Imperial Uncle is open to allowing Xu Shang to enter the ring and have some fun?"

Xiang Shaolong can smell a rat, deducing that it is Qi Yu instigating this fight, hoping to ruffle the feathers of his love rival.

After getting to know Soft Boned Beauty better, he is conscious that regardless of Qi Yu or Xu Shang, they would definitely end up with a huge disappointment if they thought that she would fall in love with them. Nonetheless, Xu Shang is an expert swordsman, almost as good as Guan Zhongxie. Even if it was Zongsun Xuanhua or Min Tingzhang taking the fight, they may not be able to overcome him.

Momentarily stunned, Lu Buwei quizzed: "With our super swordsman Great

General here, why would the people of Qixia want to go for anyone else?"

Tian Jian officially replied: "My royal father has just issued a strict decree that nobody is allowed to challenge Great General before and after his duel with Grandmaster Cao. Ma Chenjia has already been punished."

Lu Buwei lightly sniggered to conceal the awkwardness and unease in his heart.

Tian Dan's face darkened, as he is partly responsible for Ma Chenjia's case.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong applauded this decision and also knew that it is Tian Jian helping him in secret. He intentionally blurted: "Maybe it is Brother Qi Yu who wants to have some fun with Commander Xu."

Realizing that Xiang Shaolong has learnt about the two men fighting over Lan Gongyuan, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan started to fidget unnaturally.

Lu Buwei was about to say something when the crowd suddenly erupted into loud cheering.

As everyone turned their attention back to the parade square, the faces of Xiang Shaolong, Tian Dan and Xie Ziyuan had a change in expression.

Shan Rou was proudly walking to the centre of the square. She shrilly called out: "It is now the beginning of our dueling event. Shan Rou wishes to seek the guidance of Tian Bang."

Tian Dan violently shuddered once, knowing that Shan Rou is banking on her husband Xie Ziyuan's rising authority, openly bullying him and is now using his precious son as a revenge target.

Although Tian Bang's swordsmanship is above average, it cannot be compared to Shan Rou who happens to be one of Cao Cuidao's top disciples. Fighting her is as good as sending him to the slaughterhouse.

If Tian Bang were to reject her, he can forget about raising his head high up again. Moreover, his opponent is a female, exacerbating the situation.

Zongsun Xuanhua and the other senior disciples who are organizing the Sword Meet are thrown into disarray, not knowing how to resolve this kind of scenario.

Seated at the back of the grandstand, Tian Bang's face turned deathly grey.

If the challenger was an ordinary Qixia swordsman, he could send a representative. But his opponent this time happens to be the prestigious Madam Xie who asked specifically for him. By hook or by crook, he has to take her on in person.

Tian Jian guffawed: "Madam Rou is even braver than some of our men."

With this comment from him, no one would dare to voice any objection.

Tian Bang was about to stand up but Dan Chu, who was seated beside him, held him back. Standing up himself, he icily grunted: "Since Madam Rou is in

such high spirits, why don't Dan Chu have a go first!"

This time round, it was Xie Ziyuan and Xiang Shaolong who flinched.

After all, Shan Rou has given birth to two kids and her physical stamina is a far cry from before. Against a master swordsman like Dan Chu, she may bear the brunt of the fight.

Left without a choice, Xiang Shaolong boisterously laughed before Shan Rou can reply: "My hands are itching too. Let Little Brother have this fight on behalf of Madam Rou!"

In a split second, the entire crowd exploded with deafening cheers, drowning out Shan Rou's protest and objection.

Chapter 08

Goodbye Kiss

Dan Chu lingered on the same spot, not exhibiting the slightest intention to enter the ring while Xiang Shaolong remained in his seat. By now, the crowds have shouted until their voices are hoarse. Witnessing this strange phenomenon, the rowdy calls gradually came to a stop and the parade square is now completely silent.

Exchanging glances with the exasperated Shan Rou who is still standing in the middle of the square, Xiang Shaolong grinned to himself.

Before he offered to take Shan Rou's place, he already knew that Dan Chu would not dare to take him on.

This risk is not worthwhile for Dan Chu. Before leading his army to war victories and obtaining Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong is already a force to be reckoned with. The present Xiang Shaolong is definitely much more formidable, causing Dan Chu to lack the confidence in winning the fight. Moreover, Cao Cuidao will personally take him on tomorrow; there is no need to risk his life now.

As anticipated, Dan Chu politely state: "The Great King has issued a strict decree, forbidding anyone to duel with Great General. Grandmaster Cao is the only exception. How can I defy the decree?"

The spectators instantly jeered with disappointment.

Seated within vicinity of Tian Jian, Zongsun Long stood up and loudly roared: “Who dares to defy Great King’s decree!”

The crowd instantaneously subsided, feeling bizarre that Zongsun Long is the one showcasing his authority.

Shan Rou was pleased: “In this case, why don’t General Dan show me a thing or two!”

Dan Chu glanced pleadingly at Tian Jian.

Tian Jian understood his dilemma and laughed: “Everyone in Lin Zi stands in awe of Madam Rou’s swordsmanship. General Dan probably reacted in the spur of the moment. Although Great General has made his offer, the fight would be unlawful. Let’s annul this duel.”

These words are highly appropriate, hinting that Tian Bang is inferior to Shan Rou, preserving her prestige.

With this future King of Qi intervening, Shan Rou knows that the fight is over even before it begun. Shooting a vicious glare at Xiang Shaolong, she dejectedly returned to her seat.

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Shan Rou will not let him off. However, he is not worried at all because suffering under her fists and scolding is one of the happy events of life.

Xie Ziyuan glanced at him with gratitude in his eyes.

The Sword Meet progressed on and despite some duels, there was nothing worth cheering for the crowd. Before midday, it came to a close and nothing was further heard about Xu Shang's supposed challenge.

At Qixia College, Xiang Shaolong joined Tian Jian, Tian Dan, Lu Buwei and the others for lunch. Xiang Shaolong could not endure it any longer and used this break to question Zongsun Xuanhua: "Why didn't I see any emissaries from the other States? Didn't Brother Xuanhua invite them?"

Zongsun Xuanhua behaved as if he is very intimate with Xiang Shaolong. In a hush-hush secretive manner, he replied: "Two days ago, our Great King held a meeting with the emissaries of the other States. Due to differences in opinion, the meeting ended on a distasteful note. Today, they must have intentionally given us the cold shoulder; otherwise, the Sword Meet would be much more lively."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong was enlightened that their discussion must be concerning Qin resistance efforts. Since Qi is persisting in outdated methods of engagement, their negotiations with the other eastern States would surely end up in a deadlock.

He recalled that he himself was responsible for destroying two rounds of allied military campaigns. The first time, he employed a scheme. By releasing Wei Zhen back to his country and using him to arouse the Wei King's suspicions of Prince Xinling, he was able to deceive the King of Wei into recalling Prince Xinling from the battlefield. Left leaderless, the coalition fell

apart.

The second time, he personally led an army and defeated the allied forces soundly as they were en route to Xianyang, causing them to suffer heavy losses and eventually disintegrating.

In the eyes of the five eastern States, he can be considered their greatest enemy. No wonder Li Yuan and his other old buddies are turning their cannons on him, Xiang Shaolong.

Seated besides Tian Jian, Xiang Shaolong used this opportunity to tell him that Feng Fei's performance tonight will be her last and farewell performance before she retires. He hopes that Tian Jian can make an official announcement regarding this occurrence.

Tian Jian suggested: "My royal father has the highest admiration for First Mistress's performances. Getting him to announce it would be even better."

Xiang Shaolong praised: "That would be really wonderful! After I offer my congratulations tonight, I will return home earlier to rest in preparation for the duel tomorrow night. Please confer my thanks to the Great King on my behalf."

Tian Jian acknowledged and agreed to his requests.

Using this opening, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and slipped away.

Back at Tingsong Villa, most of the Troupe members have entered the palace

for the performance, leaving only a few maids and servants to watch over the premises. The ambience is now cold and uninviting.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to climb the stairs to the main hall, Yao Sheng caught up to him from the back, exclaiming: “Great General, your servant has something to report.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that he had instructed him to put Guo Kai and Han Chuang under surveillance. After he discovered Zongsun Long father and son secretly working with his enemies, and thinking that Yao Sheng is from Zongsun Family, he did not follow up with his progress.

Once the two men sat down at a corner, Yao Sheng narrated with a serious expression: “For the past two days, emissaries of the Three States, Chu and Yan were engaged in one meeting after another. The most frequent meetings occur between the two States of Zhao and Yan. After further investigation, my subordinates reported that swordsmen of both States have sneaked into Lin Zi City while posing as tourists or guests of the birthday celebrations.”

Xiang Shaolong asked his first question: “Did you tell Master Long or Brother Xuanhua about these information?”

Yao Sheng shook his head, declaring: “Young Master has given specific instructions, saying that as long as we are assigned to Great General, we need not report anything to them. Therefore, they have no idea about this.”

Xiang Shaolong praised: “Only people like you and your men who are familiar with Lin Zi and local issues are able to distinguish the real identities of these

Yan and Zhao swordsmen.”

Suppressing his voice, Yao Sheng added: “Yesterday evening, Yan’s Xu Yizhe and Zhao’s Guo Kai went on a tour of Qixia College together. According to the observation of my stalkers, they seemed to be conducting some sort of site inspection.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization: Could Guo Kai and company be so intelligent to correctly guess that he would make his getaway tomorrow and is therefore laying an ambush for him?

Of course that would only happen after the duel with Cao Cuidao.

For the sake of their own States, everyone is resorting to ruthless methods; even Xu Yizhe is of no exception. If they can somehow impersonate themselves as Qi swordsmen and murder Xiang Shaolong in the territory of Qi, it would be a miracle if Qin and Qi can avoid going to war.

Yao Sheng updated: “Is Great General aware that Grandmaster Cao has requested the Great King to issue an imperial decree, stating that no one is allowed to view or disturb the duel between him and Great General. As a result, before the end of the duel, everyone must stay within the city and even we are not allowed to step into the perimeter of Qixia College.”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong grasped that while this is highly beneficial for him who is planning a getaway, it too, provides great convenience for anyone who is trying to ambush him.

Frowning, he interrogated: “Does the report include details such as where they make special stops or spent an extended period of time?”

Producing a geographical map of Qixia College and its surroundings, Yao Sheng painstaking and clearly indicated the travelling path of Guo Kai and Xu Yizhe, where they stopped and how long was each stop.

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Your stalkers are truly meticulous!”

Yao Sheng cheerfully answered: “Your servant recognizes the importance of this matter and was personally involved in the stalking.”

From the bottom of his heart, Xiang Shaolong praised him and instructed him to keep this report strictly confidential.

Yao Sheng was hoping mad: “The people of Yan are scoundrels and it is so obvious to me that they are here with malicious agendas, trying to disrupt the friendly diplomacy between us and Qin. Why don’t Great General directly feedback this scheme to the Great King, beseeching him to send soldiers to protect Great General or specially allowing us to wait for Great General’s triumphant return at the bottom of Stargazing Platform?”

As Xiang Shaolong have other plans in mind, he would not accept his suggestion. Smiling as he patted his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “They would not dare to make any moves within the vicinity of Qixia College. In my opinion, they would probably lay an ambush on the road back to the city. Both sides of the road are thick, snow-covered forests, making it a perfect ambush location. Can you prepare a fire rocket for me? When I am on

my way back to the city, I will light the rocket and summon you guys to me.”

Agreeing that this is the best way out, Yao Sheng could not help but ask: “Isn’t Great General angry with them?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Xu Yizhe and Guo Kai can be considered my acquaintances. Although we would surely meet on the battlefield one day, I hope I can avoid these petty clashes with them. Live and let live.”

With admiration written all over his face, Yao Sheng excused himself.

Sitting alone in the hall, his mind is once again filled with thoughts. Recovering from his short daze, he returned back to the rear courtyard.

As he strolled along, he can sense the cold and lonely aura of Tingsong Villa, feeling melancholic as it is now an empty nest with its occupants all gone.

But once he reminded himself that he is going back to Xianyang tomorrow night, his heart immediately warmed up and felt fuzzy instead.

Back home, he must do his best to comfort his pretty wives and lovely maids. Recalling that year when he was returning to Qin from Zhao, Ting Fangshi passed away while pining for him. He could not help but start to feel helpless and frustrated again.

‘You rascal! I finally found you!’

As Xiang Shaolong turned around in shock, Shan Rou was racing towards him,

ready to vent her anger on him.

With all his unhappiness chased away by this beauty, Xiang Shaolong opened his palms, challenging: “What does Elder Sister Rou plan to do to Little Brother?”

Grabbing his shirt at the chest area, Shan Rou glared at him with her almond shaped eyes and cursed: “How dare you spoil my fun! Who needs your help? Do you really think you are better than me?” Finishing her sentences, she could not help but burst out in giggles.

Xiang Shaolong cannot resist her allure and patted her smooth face, chuckling: “As a mother of two kids, you are still indulging in violence and fighting. Elder Sister Rou should spare a thought for Brother Xie and avoid getting into scuffles with others.”

Since they met in Lin Zi, this is the first time they are sharing such physical intimacy. Her face turning slightly red, Shan Rou wailed: “Do you believe I will hack off your hand if you continue to touch me?”

Xiang Shaolong groaned: “I am leaving tomorrow night; let me take advantage of you while I can!”

Shan Rou was incredulous: “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “I just made up my mind. You must not tell anyone about this. After withstanding ten blows from your Master, I’ll be on my way.”

Revealing her concern for Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou checked: "Except for the river route that is passable, all road leading away from Lin Zi are all blockaded by snow. Tomorrow, you will be at the centre of everyone's attention; how can you possibly sail away? Who is the person arranging your transport?"

Pulling her to the garden, Xiang Shaolong explained: "I have a safe and excellent travelling method; otherwise, how could I avoid the massive manhunt of the Three States? Do you want to pass a message to your two beloved sisters?"

With a 'Pu Ci', Shan Rou laughed: "Tell them I would definitely outlive Tian Dan. In fact, I am spending my days relishing his suffering and decline."

Her face reddening again, Shan Rou bit her lower lip and suggested: "Since there is nobody around, why don't we go into the room and be intimate with each other!"

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and stammered: "How can we do this? Brother Xie is my buddy."

Shan Rou retorted: "I purposely allowed him to fool around because I wanted to fool around with you too. That will equalize the score and it is very fair and just."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "You are wrong about Brother Xie. Only when he is in a brothel setting can his creative juices start to flow and allow him to compose new songs. He did not commit any shameful acts behind your back."

Momentarily dazed, Shan Rou passionately leaned closer and offered her lips, declaring: “Then let’s share a kiss! Treat it as a kiss of encouragement for your duel and also a goodbye kiss for your trip!”

Shan Rou had barely left when Xie Ziyuan arrived.

Xiang Shaolong thought: What a close shave!

After scrutinizing him for a while, Xie Ziyuan heaved a sigh of relief: “Little Brother thought she would have given you a beating! Xuanhua told me that after she learnt that you had returned home, she hurried over here like a mad woman.”

With his fingers crossed, Xiang Shaolong remarked: “Sister in law is not an unreasonable person. It is just that her temper is unbearable!”

Taking a seat, Xie Ziyuan observed: “Now that this place is deserted, I find it rather peaceful instead. We can speak our hearts without fear.”

Sitting down beside him, an astonished Xiang Shaolong probed: “What is on Brother Xie’s mind?”

Xie Ziyuan sighed with a breath of air: “You might find it unbelievable but I am thinking of quitting! However, Second Prince would not hear of it.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: “Brother Xie is doing very well in your official career. Why are you suddenly thinking of retiring?”

Xie Ziyuan bitterly smiled: “As officials, most of us would have a terrible ending. The higher our ranks, the more enemies we have. When you are riding high, nobody could touch you but when you eventually make mistakes, others would start vying for your position. Besides managing your subordinates, you have to live in constant fear of offending your superiors. Such a life is truly meaningless. Wifey has always mentioned that I am ill suited for an official career as I am not vicious enough. For example, Zongsun Long father and son have disappointed me thoroughly. Till now, they have not told me about their secret meeting with Lu Buwei.”

Sighing along with him, Xiang Shaolong advised: “There is a trick to quitting an official career. Just feign an illness.”

Enlightened by his words, Xie Ziyuan’s eyes began to glow. Slapping the table, he exclaimed: “Brother Xiang is wise indeed. That’s it. For all you know, I may be able to visit Brother Xiang in Xianyang in the near future; and not forgetting Talented Lady Ji. Hey! With Brother Xiang’s connections, I may even get to meet Widow Qin!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not aware of the relationship between Qin Qing and himself. Patting his chest, he swore: “You can count on Little Brother.”

Concurrently, his heart skipped a beat as he recollected Xiao Pan’s identity crisis.

Gazing at the sky outside the hall, Xie Ziyuan suggested: “I have to enter the palace earlier than usual. Later, allow me to get somebody to fetch Brother

Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong politely rejected his offer and personally sent him off before returning to his room. Lying on his bed, he took out Yao Sheng's map and began analyzing it.

If he was Xu Yizhe or Guo Kai, he would definitely place an ambush on both sides of the mile long official road between Qixia College and the City highway. If an arrow attack is launched under the cover of the thick and snowy forests on both sides of the road, the target would be unable to react in time and his death is guaranteed.

If he had pretended to walk back to Lin Zi City but suddenly run away in the direction of the snowy wilderness, how would the ambushers react?

The sound of knocking is heard and in came Xiao Yuetan.

Xiang Shaolong jumped out of bed and passed the map to him while repeating Yao Sheng's report.

Pointing to a southwestern mark outside Qixia College, Xiao Yuetan described: "Tomorrow, I will bury travelling clothes and the snowboard on top of a small hill over here. It will be at the top of a west facing slope, allowing you to conveniently slide down."

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: "Is it completed?"

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: "It should be completed after a night's work. I

will be skipping the banquet tonight and at the same time, prevent Lu Buwei from identifying myself.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling bad: “Isn’t it a waste?”

Xiao Yuetan nonchalantly state: “Entertainment accounts for nothing. Only when Shaolong has safely returned to Xianyang can we continue our campaign against Lu Buwei. You may not see me tomorrow. Elder Brother came here specially to bade farewell to you.”

Stretching out his own hand and strongly gripping Xiao Yuetan’s hand, Xiang Shaolong gratefully thanked: “The deepest gratitude lies beyond thanking. I do not know what to say to express the emotions in my heart.”

Xiao Yuetan grinned: “I am sure these thoughts would change in the near future. Everything I do is for your own good. Help Elder Brother send my regards to Yanran and the others, tell them Elder Brother misses them terribly.”

Xiang Shaolong was baffled: “Why is Elder Brother speaking like this? No matter what happens, I, Xiang Shaolong, would never blame you for anything.”

Staring intently at Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan warned: “A man’s heart is impossible to fathom. Do not keep thinking that you can get away with merely ten strokes. You must always take precautions in case he changes his mind due to aggravation.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "After making the mistake of trusting Li Yuan and Han Chuang, I am not as gullible as before."

Hearing his words, Xiao Yuetan became visibly relaxed. He further reminded: "If you can survive this difficulty and successfully return to Xianyang, your victory would be complete. Otherwise, all your previous efforts would have gone down the drain."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong knows that he still have to resolve Xiao Pan's identity predicament. Unfortunately, he cannot share this burden with Xiao Yuetan. He solemnly swore: "I would not lose this fight."

Xiao Yuetan was elated: "Shaolong has finally regained your confidence!"

Xiang Shaolong muttered to himself: "It is very mysterious. Having lost Hundred Battle Sabre and repossessing it later, I felt like a completely different person. I felt as if I did not suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Li Mu. It was a full recovery from the period of time when I was utterly depressed."

Xiao Yuetan stood up and bade: "There is no need to send me off. Please take good care of yourself. There may come a time in the future when we will head out to the borders together and turn our sights to the huge grasslands."

His eyes trailing Xiao Yuetan's back until he disappeared at the extreme end of the corridor, Xiang Shaolong suddenly remember the first time when he met Xiao Yuetan in Handan. After this talented and capable man finished their official discussions, he immediately requested a courtesan from the Wu

Family to accompany him to bed, leaving him a bad impression of this man. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect Xiao Yuetan to be a righteous hero and even ended up as his soul mate.

The path of life is never a straight line.

Aye!

Since he is going to the birthday banquet, he might as well be early.

Since he became a fugitive, not a day goes by without him pining for his home. Only at home can he find the long awaited feelings of true happiness and peace.

Chapter 09

The Grand Banquet At The Palace Of Qi

On the way to the palace, Xiang Shaolong observed that the roads leading to the Small City where the palace was located was packed with numerous carriages and they were travelling at a snail's pace. He could not help but praised himself for making the excellent choice of riding a horse. Riding along the walkway or squeezing between carriages according the available road conditions with Yao Sheng and his team, they agilely and swiftly made their way towards the palace.

Wherever he rode, people started staring at him. Regardless of girls from rich families or the wives of officials, everyone pulled aside their carriage curtains to catch a glimpse of his elegant demeanor, wanting to see for themselves the appearance of this man who is able to win the heart of Talented Lady Ji.

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not disappoint them. With a warrior headband around his forehead, an exquisite inner shirt and a long and huge cape, he was particularly outstanding. In addition, his back is straight, his handsome features are well-defined and the corner of his lips is portrayed in a somewhat faint smirk. Coupled with the world famous Hundred Battle Sabre hanging around his waist, he exudes a mesmerizing charm that would overwhelm all the beauties under the sky.

Yao Sheng and the others share his glory too. With puffed chests and straightened backs, they are awe-inspiring in their own right.

Overtaking every carriage they met, they soon came to the entrance of Small City. The Imperial Guards solemnly saluted Xiang Shaolong upon laying their eyes on him.

Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, is feeling as calm as still water, beyond the reaches of happiness or sadness.

Before he set off, he meditated for a full two hours before taking a shower and getting a change of clothes. He can feel his own alertness and energy level at a peak that he has never attained before. Brimming with hope and confidence, he can feel that he is in complete control of everything that is about to happen.

The troubles in life will repeat themselves endlessly.

Since he left Xianyang and took his first step into the battlefield, he has been living under immense stress and danger every second of his life. When he became a fugitive, he was forced to make life and death choices on an hourly basis. Up till this point when he was about to pit his skills against this behemoth of swordsmanship for a clear cut victory and trek through countless hills and cross numerous rivers to return to his warm and inviting home, he felt as if his entire life has accomplished an incredible sense of fulfillment.

He must always remind himself of this wonderful feeling. Although the sounds of people and carriages are conjured around him, he felt as if they are a long distance away from him.

Everything that enters his sight seemed to be surreal. The only genuine sensations he can experience are his own body and the movement of the horse.

He is deeply entrenched in this amazing time travel dream, sinking to the innermost sanctum of it. There, he is beyond salvation, beyond redemption and cannot even wake up even if he wants to.

Out of the blue, someone called out: Great General, taking his out of his stupor.

Xiang Shaolong reduced his horse-riding speed and turned his head in the direction of the voice. Three carriages behind him, he noticed someone sticking his head out of the carriage window and is waving at him. It turned out to be Guo Kai.

The Zhao riders surrounding Guo Kai's carriage saluted him.

Xiang Shaolong held his horse on the same spot. After much difficulty, the carriage managed to catch up from the back. Guo Kai sighed: "I finally get to meet Shaolong. In Shouchun, we were facing each other but I did not recognize you. Now, we can officially talk with our real identities. Empress Jing has been pining for you!"

This crafty ghost Guo Kai has aged considerably, becoming so fat that his face is completely round, losing much of his past grandeur. Although Xiang Shaolong dislike him and knew that he is scheming against himself, he pretended to be intimate with this old friend, chuckling: "Chancellor Guo

must be living a good life without worries and stress, causing you to put on weight. If we met on the streets, I may not be able to recognise you!”

His gaze shifting to the Hundred Battle Sabre, Guo Kai emotionally remarked: “Back in the past, the late King made a wrong decision and placed his trust in Zhao Mu. Otherwise, not only would Shaolong and I still be best friends, we may even be partners working hand in hand to resist our common enemies.”

Adjusting his horse to match the slow speed of the carriage, Xiang Shaolong is rotating between occasional stops or sluggish canter. With Yao Sheng and his compatriots escorting him from the front and back, they are inadvertently drawing more attention to themselves.

Crossing into Small City, the celebratory aura in the air is even more prominent than before. Every household is lavishly decorated with lighted lanterns and red banners while the sound of firecrackers popping consistently invaded his eardrums.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Unfortunately, there is no ‘otherwise’ in real life. For example, after a man has died, he cannot be brought back to life. Even if you can re-experience a past moment of your life, things will still turn out the same way.”

Of course Guo Kai is unable to comprehend the true essence of his feelings. Continuing his previous topic, he added: “Reminiscing about the past, one cannot help but feel emotional. Nevertheless, an outstanding talent will shine wherever he goes. Shaolong is a fine example.”

Xiang Shaolong was restless, being able to sense that an emotional Guo Kai is exhibiting rare honesty, given his deplorable character, due to his knowledge about tomorrow's event. From his point of view, Xiang Shaolong would either perish under the hands of Cao Cuidao or the ambush that he has laid.

Why is he feeling so confident?

Did he really correctly guess that Xiang Shaolong is prepared to slip away tomorrow night?

Unless there is a spy within the Song & Dance Troupe who had told him that Xiang Shaolong has been delivering instructions in a manner that resembles a dying man reading out his will, an outsider should not have been able to make such a wise deduction.

At this juncture, his mind suddenly recalled Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning'er. He had suspected that she was the one who stole the song sheet for Zhang Quan but was unable to prove it

If Guo Kai managed to get in touch with Zhang Quan, they could easily track Xiang Shaolong's activities. All along, Guo Kai is a clever and scheming person. Observant and sharp, he is able to link small incidents to a bigger picture. Moreover, he is knowledgeable about Xiang Shaolong's character and it is not impossible for him to lay an inescapable ambush.

If this is proven to be true, the element of danger for tomorrow night would be significantly higher. Besides ambushing the road back to the City, the Yan and Zhao attackers may extend their ambush to cover other areas. To make it

worse, nobody else can help him. This has to be a solo battle.

Guo Kai was astonished: "What is Shaolong thinking about?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "I was thinking that if Chancellor Guo were to send someone to try and kill me, I would not bear any hatred against you."

Guo Kai violently trembled: "But I would not feel good about it. If not for Shaolong sparing my life at Handan's Hostage Residence years ago, I, Guo Kai, would not be able to accomplish what I have today. This development is truly regrettable."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to remember that incident and his goodwill towards him increased by a few notches. However, he did not know what to say for the time being.

Guo Kai suddenly questioned: "Back then, Lady Ni left a son after passing away. Did he follow Shaolong to Xianyang? Why didn't I hear anything about him? Lady Ni is a good lady, someone worth commemorating. Unfortunately, Heaven is jealous of her beauty. Aye!"

Suppressing the tsunami erupting in his mind, Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lu Buwei's willful spreading of Xiao Pan's questionable heritage is akin to throwing a huge boulder into a pool of still water; throwing up many scenarios and questions. For example, Guo Kai is now suspecting that Xiao Pan is Yingzheng himself.

This is no laughing matter. If Lu Buwei gets wind of this and matching the

testimony of the couple he kidnapped from Handan, this would become a debate they cannot hope to win.

He instead replied: "Grieving for his mother's passing, the kid refuses to eat or drink during the journey. Due to the harsh travelling conditions, he eventually succumbed to illness and death."

Guo Kai acknowledged with an 'Orh', but his expression tells Xiang Shaolong that he had already anticipated this answer from him.

No longer keen to stick around him, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and pushed the horse to go faster. Overtaking ten odd carriages in a row, he entered the palace.

The palace of Qi was extravagantly adorned and it was an imposing sight.

The throne and the VIP tables are located on the top of Henggong Platform, numbering close to a hundred. At the square below Henggong Platform, over a thousand tables were neatly arranged. They were assigned to the lower ranking civil and military officials, as well as the rich tycoons or educated scholars who are invited to the banquet.

The performing stage for the Song & Dance routine is the raised stage in the centre of Henggong Platform. The musicians are based on the lower level and facing the throne.

Within the palace, every available spot is crowded with people who are dressed to the nines. For the ladies, they cannot avoid competing with each

other in terms of their dressing.

Covered with a blanket and lying down, the King of Qi is at Dianjiang Platform, the lower deck of Henggong Platform. With a delighted expression, he was busy receiving congratulations from his well wishers.

Tian Jian is even more enthusiastic than him. With his kingly future secured, everyone is flattering him nonstop and trying their best to get into his good books. Even those who didn't know what is going on would somehow have an idea that he would become an important figure of Qi.

After Xiang Shaolong offered his congratulations to the King of Qi, he noticed Zongsun Long fighting for Tian Jian's attention and sweet-talking him. Inversely, Tian Dan is standing at a side with a look of contempt on his face while chatting idly with Lu Buwei and Guo Kai. He could not help but think of Xiao Pan again.

Whoever that becomes King would certainly be corrupted by power and the flattery of officials, blinding himself to the truth in time to come. This kind of side effect has become the norm. Xiao Pan is visibly a changed man. How long can their mutual trusts last?

Li Yuan's voice sounded beside his ear: "Shaolong! Let's find a quiet place and have a chat."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Is there a quiet place here? Do we need to walk a few miles?"

Li Yuan laughed along and pulled him towards the door of the platform. As they walked past a group of concubines, the various ladies were staring intensely at the two of them.

Thinking of Lady Qingxiu and Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong scanned their faces but did not manage to pinpoint the two ladies among them.

Squeezing out of the overcrowded hall, the two men climbed to the top of Henggong Platform. There, palace maids are busying themselves by laying the tables as well as arranging delicious food and wine. It was a lively scene.

Making their way to a corner of Henggong Platform that was far away from the throne where one can see the wilderness and horizon over and beyond the city walls, Li Yuan leaned on a railing under the bright illumination of lanterns, checking: "When does Shaolong intend to return to Xianyang; are you open to travelling with Little Brother?"

Xiang Shaolong is unable to find any traces of hatred for him within his heart. He plainly answered: "There is no need to trouble you. Travelling through Wei would be faster and sailing is much more comfortable."

Li Yuan agreed: "You can save half the travelling time; however, are there any security concerns?"

Xiang Shaolong responded: "I will officially ask Qi to send a team to escort me home. Coupled with Zongsun Long's protection and arrangements, there shouldn't be a problem."

Li Yuan kept probing: “When do you plan to leave?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “I can only leave after the Qixia College Performance, otherwise, it would be hard for me to put my mind at ease.”

Li Yuan suppressed his voice: “Tomorrow night, you must take extra precautions. I am confident that Shaolong would survive your duel with Grandmaster Cao. However, the people of Qi would not take this lying down. I have heard rumours saying that the Extremists of Qixia are preparing to ambush you on the way back to the city should you emerge victorious from the fight. Why don’t I fetch you personally? You can use a fire signal to communicate with me.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised his formidability. If he does not know that Li Yuan is Guo Kai’s accomplice, it would be a miracle if he did not fall into their trap.

From his sentences, he could also be testing Xiang Shaolong to see if he would slip away under the cover of the night.

With such ‘kind intentions’, it would be illogical for him to refuse. Xiang Shaolong promptly agreed and indicated the fire signals that he would employ.

He then intentionally brought up: “When you are back at Shouchun, please send my regards to your wife and Empress.”

A sensation of deep pain flashed past his eyes as Li Yuan suddenly grabbed

Xiang Shaolong's shoulder's, stammering: "Shaolong..."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling agitated too but he calmly wondered: "Yes?"

Extracting himself from his emotional state, Li Yuan loosened his grip and shook his head, lamenting: "Nothing. Thinking that we would soon be separated from each other and may even meet on the battlefield, fighting for our right to live, I could not help but feel exasperated! It is really nothing."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself!

Han Chuang's laughter filled the air as he approached them: "I didn't know Chancellor Li and Great General were hiding here. Shaolong is truly remarkable, with the Three Famous Courtesans taking turns to ask me where is our handsome friend. Little Marquis is so jealous I feel like committing suicide!"

If not for their enmity, Han Chuang would definitely make an excellent partying companion.

Thinking that he should do his bit to stimulate the morale of the Song & Dance Troupe, especially Dong Shuzen who is taking centerstage for the first time, Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Where are they?"

Arriving at the front of the two men, Han Chuang replied: "They are at the lowest platform, Cihuai Platform. Shall Little Marquis lead the way?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I shall visit them and subsequently find an

opportunity to leave early.”

Li Yuan understandingly agreed: “That’s the way. Sufficient rest is crucial. Let us accompany you!”

Walking between the two men, Xiang Shaolong took the chance to request: “Regardless of what happens between the various States, I hope that both gentlemen can grant me a favour: Take good care of Shuzen.”

Han Chuang sighed: “Relax! If we cannot even do something as simple as that, can we be considered human?”

Xiang Shaolong took his word for it.

Stepping into Cihuai Platform, Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Originally, a gigantic hall, it was partitioned by cloth into three areas and it is swarming with people. The sound of ladies giggling and teasing each other sounded continuously.

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Let’s part ways here. I wish to meet them alone.”

With a heavy expression on their faces, Li Yuan and Han Chuang held his hands as a form of goodbye. Li Yuan offered: “Let us escort you out of the city tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I’ll be fine! Lu Buwei and Second Prince have already informed me that they will be escorting me.”

Sitting alone in front of a bronze mirror, Feng Fei is receiving last minute touching up of her make up by Little Ping'er and Yunniang.

Xiang Shaolong was moved by her beauty. He acknowledged: "No wonder First Mistress is able to head the Three Famous Courtesans. With your beauty alone, it is more than enough to convince anyone that you are an angel from heaven."

Feng Fei gave him a sweet smile but complained: "Without you appreciating at the side, being an angel is meaningless! After all, this is my last performance!"

The next second, she laughed: "Ignore my whining. Great General's duel tomorrow night is critical. Be a good boy and go to bed early tonight! Feng Fei will spend her whole day with you tomorrow."

Keeping a lookout from the corner of his eye, Xiang Shaolong noticed Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning'er making an excuse to get close to them. Confirming his suspicions that she plans to spy on their conversation, he intentionally declared: "After Little Brother's triumphant return, I shall accompany First Mistress to go sightseeing."

Feng Fei happily agreed.

Approaching Dong Shuzen, Xiang Shaolong inquired: "Are you feeling nervous?"

Standing beside Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen giggled: "Second Mistress dare

not speak the entire day for fear of spoiling her vocal cords. What does Great General think about her nervousness?"

Dong Shuzen secretly gripped his hand tightly and leaned towards his ear, whispering: "The night after tomorrow, I shall accompany you to bed."

Xiang Shaolong left with a bitter smile. Touring one round within the partition, he observed that various Troupe members are highly spirited and do not require him to boost their morale. Feeling satisfied and fulfilled, he pushed aside a cloth partition in order to leave the area. Unexpectedly, he ran into Boss Jin who consequently dragged him to meet Shi Sufang.

Covered with a hooded cape, Shi Sufang is standing at one corner like a ghost, silently watching the other members of her troupe completing their assigned tasks. She appeared to be isolated from the rest of them and in the same context, no one dared to disturb her tranquility.

Boss Jin whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ear: "Since she was young, Sufang has always maintained her withdrawn character. Nevertheless, her talent cannot be denied. She cannot be bothered with anything but the minute she learns something, she would easily surpass her teachers. In her whole lifetime, she only respects Feng Fei and no other."

Xiang Shaolong could imagine that she does not have any regards for Talented Lady Ji too. Otherwise, why didn't she pay her a visit.

Leading Xiang Shaolong to Shi Sufang's side, Boss Jin softly called: "Sufang! Sufang! Great General is here to visit you!"

Hearing the Great General title, Shi Sufang's petite frame faintly shuddered and brilliance started to return to her hollow eyes. Turning her pretty head, she looked at the direction of Xiang Shaolong.

At this juncture, all her fellow courtesans and troupe workers stopped what they were doing and gazed at Xiang Shaolong with astonishment. When Boss Jin waved them off with a gesture, they unwilling continued their original work, such as applying make up or tuning their musical instruments.

Patting Xiang Shaolong, Boss Jin remarked: "The two of you should have a good talk!"

Visibly annoyed with the intermittent peeping by the other troupe members, Shi Sufang lightly invited: "Great General, please follow Sufang!"

Pulling a curtain behind her, it turned out to be a specially partitioned small area. The ground was covered by a mat and there are sitting cushions as well. A long bronze mirror and a rack full of costumes are present too.

Both of them sat on the floor.

Despite being surrounded by noise and the occasional tuning sounds from musical instruments, this enclosed area is surprisingly quiet and private.

With her pitiful-looking and mesmerizing eyes slowly scanning Xiang Shaolong, Shi Sufang then turned her gaze to a curtain by the side and plainly questioned: "Does Great General enjoy loneliness?"

After careful consideration, Xiang Shaolong gingerly answered: "Some of the time, I need my personal space and silence, which allows me to go into deep contemplation."

With a melancholic tone, Shi Sufang inquired: "What do you contemplate about?"

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "There is no fixed thought. It depends on what are the matters that are troubling me!"

Shi Sufang nodded: "You are very frank. In fact, among all the men that Sufang has met, Great General's complete honesty and un-hypocritical character is rare indeed. Most of them love to boast about their own achievements, as if they are afraid that I do not recognize them for their talents. It is truly disgusting."

Shifting her gaze back to his face and looking at him in such a manner than Xiang Shaolong can start to feel something for her, Shi Sufang divulged: "After our meeting at Xianyang, Great General has left a deep impression in Sufang's heart. At that time, Sufang was thinking, is Great General someone I can confide in?"

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but utter: "I heard Mister Pu Hu is on good terms with Miss!"

Revealing bitter smile on her face, Shi Sufang lowered her gaze and calmly professed: "It is either A kill B or B kill A. Moreover, everyone has to die one day and become a star in the sky. What is there to be worried about?"

Xiang Shaolong quietly pondered on the meaning of her words and the negative connotation. For a period of time, he was dumbfounded.

Shi Sufang seems to be mired in her self-created dreamy state that she can never hope to exit. In a gentle voice, she described: "Sufang's only desire is to simplify my life and does not wish to have too many people or circumstances involved. Aye! More often than not, the people and situations in life are but a fleeting moment. Although they truly exist, they remained meaningless to me. How I wish I can become a tree, slowly and quietly growing up all by myself in the wilderness. All I need is sunshine, rainwater and soil."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "No wonder Miss enjoys the theories of Zhuang Zhou."

Shi Sufang added: "And Li Er. For everything in life you can do with, you can also do without. A small state with an even smaller population, there is zero social interaction. What a thorough understanding of life! Fame and riches will only bring about inequality in society. The tussle between humans is never-ending. Great General, what are your views on this?"

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen someone from this era who loves to be left alone and with an anti-progression and anti-human advancement mindset. In addition, this person happens to be a female. He nodded: "Presently, the situation is not that bad. With a massive increase in population and the grasslands transforming into cities, and the resources of nature are being consumed non-stop until they are lacking, on top of animals having nowhere to reside because of urbanization, that would be scary."

Shi Sufang vividly shivered: “Great General has more foresight than Sufang.”

Xiang Shaolong exhaled with a breath: “This development will certainly materialize itself. From the beginning of time, human intelligence has been sitting on the opposite fence of nature. We are unlike plants and animals who coexist peacefully with our environment.”

After some thought and displaying signs of unhappiness, Shi Sufang quizzed: “When does Great General intend to return to Qin?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Probably these few days. Hey! I need to make a move too.”

Nodding her head slightly, Shi Sufang did not reply and sank into deep contemplation.

Standing up, Xiang Shaolong left as quietly as possible.

Chapter 10

Farewell Letters

Feng Fei and the others got home around one am that same night. Everyone is behaving in a joyful manner, indicating that the performance is a great success.

Several of the courtesans quietly entered his room to check on him. Resisting the urge to get up, Xiang Shaolong pretended to be sleeping in response to their invasion.

When the rear courtyard has more or less resumed its tranquility, Xiang Shaolong sat down in lotus position and began meditating according to Mozi's teachings and rejuvenating breathing techniques. Before dawn, he took Hundred Battle Sabre to the garden for another round of practice.

He was glad that he left before the end of the banquet last night and is able to preserve the tiptop condition of his mental and physical strength.

Using both his hands to hold the sabre, he repeatedly maneuvered several moves, trying to simplify the process. Placing speed as his top priority, he fought an imaginary Cao Cuidao.

Fighting against this Sword Saint, even the ever-changing and incredible swordplay of Mozi became useless moves.

He can only gather the essence of scientific and modern attacks, merging it with his sabre play.

At that time, most of the other Troupe members are either dead drunk or still in dreamland. Delighted to be left undisturbed, he can focus his mind and concentrate on his warm up exercises.

He proceeded to the bathroom and enjoyed a cold shower. With his alertness at full capacity, he returned back to his room for another round of mediation. Shortly thereafter, Little Ping'er came to summon him.

At the breakfast table, the courtesans are in full attendance. Yunniang, the Head Musician cum Conductor, as well as several other accomplished musicians were present too.

For a start, Feng Fei represented everyone in expressing their gratitude for Xiang Shaolong. With her eyes full of reminiscence, she recounted: "At the end of Shuzen's song, Prince (Tian) Jian officially announced the retirement of Feng Fei. The standing ovation of the audience is something I can never forget."

Yunniang giggled: "Everyone who is present is honoured to have viewed First Mistress's last performance."

Zhu Xiuzhen enthusiastically described: "Last night, First Mistress's performance is simply fantastic and even we are intoxicated by her singing. No one is able to retain his or her senses at her spellbinding vocals. For a while, we were worried that Second Mistress may put up an inferior

performance due to the pressure from First Mistress. Luckily, Second Mistress is able to deliver a spectacular song, cumulating in a breathtaking finale of the Song & Dance presentation.”

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed: “Are you people trying to make me feel bad?” The ladies burst into shrill laughter at his teasing.

Dong Shuzen gratefully extended: “Li Yuan of Chu, Marquis Chuang of Han and Lord Longyang of Wei have officially invited us to perform at their respective States...”

Xinyue interrupted: “Only Great General of Qin has yet to officially invite us.”

The ladies began laughing again and the ambience is relaxing and friendly. This is also because the depressing mood of troupe disbandment no longer exists. Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “We are one big family right? When you people come over to Xianyang, it is as good as coming home. See, isn’t this better than an invitation?” The ladies burst out in giggles again.

Dong Shuzen wondered out loud: “What does First Mistress and Great General think of Fei Chun?” Both of them can tell that she is picking a new manager and praised her foresight.

After breakfast has concluded, Xiang Shaolong and Fei Fei went for a stroll in the garden. Both parties can feel a lump in their throats.

Feng Fei calmly state: “For the time being, I will not be going to Xianyang!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Where does Mistress intend to go?"

Gazing at a particularly large cluster of clouds floating in the sky, Feng Fei replied: "Feng Fei is thinking of following Lady Qingxiu back to Chu and staying there for some time. I have grown tired of the extreme cold weather and would like to experience the marvelous sights of the south."

Xiang Shaolong made a wild guess that she wanted to avoid Han Jie and nodded: "It is good to have a change of environment. Xianyang's winter is quite tormenting as well."

Feng Fei shot him a look: "Do not think that you have gotten rid of me; maybe one day, I will come looking for you at your residence and refuse to leave."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that she is joking and loudly laughed: "This is something no man in his right mind would reject. Seriously speaking, First Mistress must not forget to come and visit Little Brother."

With a melancholic tone, Feng Fei enquired: "Is Great General leaving tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong answered in a deep voice: "If I can survive the duel, it would be unwise for me to hang around here."

Feng Fei cheerfully exclaimed: "Great General is finally trusting Feng Fei wholeheartedly. With this knowledge, I will no longer have any regrets in life."

She added in a gentle voice: “Feng Fei will rather die than divulge Xiang Shaolong’s secret.”

Xiang Shaolong reminisced that both of them have progressed from mutual distrust to mutual scheming to this final stage of mutually regarding each other as a confidante and could not help but feel his heart brimming with delight and comfort.

One of the touching moments about life is that ugliness and beauty can coexist in the same dimension. The human nature is an uneven object; depending on the angle you are viewing from, you will get a different perspective every time.

For example, it is challenging for him to classify Li Yuan or Han Chuang as villains.

Every person has his or her principles. When there are benefits involved and others are forced to act against you, you would naturally get angry and regard them with hatred.

Feng Fei suddenly mentioned: “It will be sunset before you know it. Aye, it is truly heartrending when I do not know if I can ever see Great General again in the future.”

At this juncture, Xiao Yuetan came to look for Xiang Shaolong, interrupting their farewell speeches. At the Eastern Chamber, Xiao Yuetan produced a stack of parchments and snickered: “I wrote these letters for you this morning. They are farewell letters to Lu Buwei, the King of Qi, newly

promoted Crown Prince Tian Jian, Xie Ziyuan and not forgetting Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Zongsun Long. The letters to Li Yuan and Han Chuang are imbued with special meaning. After browsing through, do sign them if you have no issue with the content. After your successful departure, I will get Feng Fei to send them out on your behalf.”

Xiang Shaolong was worried: “Aren’t you concerned that Lu Buwei would recognize your handwriting?”

Xiao Yuetan assured: “I am well-versed in all kinds of handwriting and forgery; I guarantee that he would be unable to recognize it.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a praise: “Not harnessing the abilities of a talented man like yourself, Lu Buwei is as stupid as can be.”

Xiao Yuetan viciously reasoned: “He is purposely sacrificing me to divert suspicions away from himself. At the same time, he can use this opportunity to weaken the prowess of his Old Guard.”

Xiao Yuetan is a man who values relationships and is especially disgusted with Lu Buwei’s ungrateful behavior.

Right now, he is doing everything he can to assist Xiang Shaolong without any reservations is precisely because they are similar in nature.

Xiang Shaolong casually selected one of the letters and opened it up for a look. The letter read: Greetings to Marquis Chuang. By the time Lord Marquis is reading this letter, Shaolong is miles away. For me to leave without saying

goodbye, I am forced by circumstances and Lord Marquis should know better than myself. I trust that you will not blame Shaolong for being impolite. Life is full of happiness and sorrow; coming and going; love and hatred, friendship and enmity. Now that we have split paths once again, our next meeting remains an unknown. I pray that everything will go smoothly for Lord Marquis and may Lord Marquis live a life of longevity. Yours sincerely, Shaolong.

Holding the letter, Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “When Han Chuang reads this letter, he would be experiencing a hundred and one emotions simultaneously. He would have trouble expressing his difficulties.”

Xiao Yuetan proudly selected another letter and passed to him, remarking: “This is for Li Yuan.”

Xiang Shaolong held up the letter and read: “Chancellor Li, my respected elder brother. Life is unpredictable and full of gatherings and separations. Recalling the times when we fight side by side and watching each other’s back with no reservations, the memory is still fresh within me. Regrettably, times have changed and the past cannot be repeated in the present. It is painfully lamentable. Now that Little Brother is on my way home, I sincerely wish Chancellor every success in your career and may you never be toppled.”

Slapping the table, Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Can we add two sentences? However, the copywriting has to be done by Elder Brother. I really love the hot-cold sarcastic style of writing.” He proceeded to tell Xiao Yuetan about last night when Li Yuan offered to escort him back from Qixia College.

Readied with a brush and ink, Xiao Yuetan held his laughter as he added to the end of the message: Regarding Chancellor's desire to escort me, pardon Little Brother for not taking it up. I will never forget your kind gesture.

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table again and praised his intellect.

The other letters to the King of Qi, Zongsun Long, etc were rather ordinary and there was nothing noteworthy about the dictation. The letter to Lord Longyang is the most polite-sounding and appropriate emotions were highlighted in the letter, demonstrating Xiao Yuetan's creative writing talent.

Scrutinizing Xiao Yuetan's eyes, Xiang Shaolong observed: "Elder Brother must have worked through the night and even had to write these letters early in the morning."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "Skipping a night of sleep is no big deal. The most important thing right now is to ensure that there is nothing distracting you. These letters also serve as a means to boost your fighting spirit. If you somehow lost the fight, these letters would have to be burnt."

Slapping the table and standing up, Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and let out a long laughter: "Relax. I am current at the peak of my abilities. Be it a Sword Saint or a Sword Demon, I will give it everything I've got and would deny him victory at all costs."

Stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan smiled: "I am going to disguise myself and leave the city, heading to the designated place to bury your escaping equipment for tonight. I will send out the letters for Shaolong tomorrow!"

After Xiao Yuetan's departure, the newly promoted Manager Fei Chun approached him to show his appreciation. Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong instructed: "Get someone to secretly spy on Little Ning. If she left the Villa and meet up with an outsider before I leave for my duel, tell Miss Xiuzhen to terminate her employment but do not punish her."

According to his observations, if Little Ning is a spy, she would surely have to provide a latest update about himself to the person who had bribed her. He added: "If nothing happened, take it that you never hear this from me."

Fei Chun realized what is going on and acted on his instructions.

Stretching his back, Xiang Shaolong is feeling totally relaxed.

What appeared to be some challenging difficulties are eventually beautifully resolved. All that remains is Cao Qiudao's challenge and avoiding the ambush of the Yan and Zhao swordsmen. With the snowboard, he has to speed back to Zhongmou before the snow melts. Once he reunites with Teng Yi and his other brothers, they would return to Qin together and this horrible chapter would come to a close.

Of course Xiao Pan's identity crisis needs to be solved but for the time being, he can only trust that history will not be altered.

At least in the records of history, it was not mentioned that Qin Shihuang is born outside the royal family and he is definitely not documented as the son of Lu Buwei.

In the same aspect, he could not comprehend the obvious absence of an earth-shattering figure such as himself.

In the middle of this troublesome reflection, Lord Longyang came to him with two reddish eyes. Needless to say, Xiang Shaolong knew that he had had a sleepless night.

Coming to a small pavilion in the garden, Lord Longyang sighed with a breath. It seems like he has so much to say but didn't know how to begin.

Xiang Shaolong consoled him instead: "Life and Death are predetermined; Wealth and Poverty depends on Fate. If Heaven is not ready for my death, even ten Cao Qiudaos cannot lay a finger on me."

Lord Longyang grudgingly smiled: "Perhaps Shaolong believes that Cao Qiudao is capable of showing mercy. Last night, I received news that Tian Dan had a two hour discussion with him; what do you think Tian Dan is doing?"

Xiang Shaolong was unnerved, believing that since Cao Qiudao has given his word to Xiao Yuetan, no one would be able to influence his decision.

Patting the scabbard of Hundred Battle Sabre once, Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "If he wants to kill me, he has to ask my best friend first."

Lord Longyang forcefully recomposed his spirit and clarified: "I am not trying to be a wet blanket but it is my desire to remind Shaolong not to underestimate the enemy. If you can fight, so be it. If you cannot, simply run away. He is an old man after all and I don't think he can outrun you."

Xiang Shaolong was not agitated at all. He mused: "At the end of the day, you are concerned that he may take my life."

Staring intently at him for some time, Lord Longyang professed with astonishment: "Shaolong is truly extraordinary. If it was anybody but you, it would be impossible for him to remain unaffected when faced with such a formidable fighter."

Xiang Shaolong honestly expressed: "Worrying is futile. I might as well apply the energy towards handling my opponent during the fight. Isn't that a better strategy?"

Leaning on a railing, Lord Longyang lowered his head and disclosed: "Li Yuan and Han Chuang..."

Interrupting him with a determined tone, Xiang Shaolong concluded: "Your Lordship need not go on. From now until I am done with Cao Qiudao, I do not wish to hear anything that concerns the two of them."

Lord Longyang was visibly shaken. He uttered: "Shaolong... ..."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You say it best, when you say nothing at all. Your Lordship should go home and have a good rest. Don't think so much. I will speak with you tomorrow!"

Lord Longyang slowly stepped to his front and gave him a light embrace, commending: "Shaolong's overwhelming confidence has convinced me that you will surely surmount all sorts of difficulties. Take care of yourself."

Watching the back of Lord Longyang gradually disappearing under the cover of the trees, Xiang Shaolong felt immensely apologetic.

Under the leadership of Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen, every single Troupe member is assembled at the courtyard square, bidding farewell to their hero. Their eyes trailed his back until he boarded the carriage of Lu Buwei and the new Crown Prince Tian Jian.

With their flags fluttering in a grand appearance, scores of Qi soldiers neatly rode out of Tingsong Villa, paving way for the carriage carrying the three men. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

With a team of one hundred Imperial Guards protecting them, they entered the highway. On both sides of the roads, people have gathered to send them off. It is not known if they are supporting Cao Qiudao or admiring Xiang Shaolong's 'act of valor'.

Including Xiang Shaolong himself, nobody can ever imagine Cao Qiudao losing a duel. The question is: Can Xiang Shaolong survive this catastrophe?

This carriage is especially wide and the seats are constructed near the tail end of the carriage. Due to the extra room, up to four men can sit side by side. As Xiang Shaolong is the main character for tonight, he could not reject and naturally had to sit in between Tian Jian and Lu Buwei.

In the recent years, it is rare for him to be so intimate with this great nemesis Lu Buwei. Feeling completely out of place, Xiang Shaolong prayed for the journey to end as quickly as possible.

He firstly congratulated Tian Jian for becoming the new Crown Prince and Tian Jian was chortling so cheerfully he could not keep his mouth closed. Lu Buwei interrupted: “Earlier on, Prince and I were discussing the best way to rule a State. Prince mentioned Guan Zhong’s Book of People Governance and singled out the theory of: Through Education, everyone will know the laws; Well-fed and well-cloth, everyone is aware of glory and shame. This is a sign of true wisdom. With Prince Jian succeeding the throne, the prosperity of Qi is something we can anticipate.”

Tian Jian is overwhelmed with happiness. He articulated: “A well-managed country is always prosperous while an ill-managed state will always remain poor. As every good king should know, we must first enrich the population before exercising our rule over them.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask: “How does Prince plan to enrich the population?”

After a short spell of silence, Tian Jian pondered: “A strong army and a rich State is inseparable. Without a strong army, the State is insecure. Without a rich State, the army cannot grow strong. This is an ageless truth.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself, recognizing that he did not have a good method to offer. By blindly regurgitating Guan Zi’s theory, it is just empty talk.

Although the time he spent in Lin Zi is limited, just by observing the existence of people like Zongsun Long, he can deduce that while Qi appears to be thriving, there is a huge divide between the rich and the poor. This is because

the King has allowed members of the royal family to join hands with unscrupulous businessmen in setting up shady industries. Every day, they are competing with one another to open up gambling dens, brothels or loansharking companies. In addition, due to a lack of ordinary schools, the education level of the population is not unanimous, leading to this income disparity as well. However, Tian Jian chose to ignore this glaring truth and make baseless comments such as building a strong army and enriching the population. He is making a joke out of himself.

Xiao Pan is far more successful than the other Kings because he is able to understand the sentiments of the population. With the brilliant advisor Li Si assisting him, his policies are practical and are not based on some empty debate.

Going all out to flatter, Lu Buwei praised: “Crown Prince’s assessment is not inferior to Guan Zhong or Qi Heng!”

Despite expressing modesty, Tian Jian is thrilled and accepted the praise wholeheartedly.

At this juncture, they are almost reaching the city gates and the crowds here are significantly thicker. Someone shouted out in a loud voice: “Grandmaster Cao will win! Grandmaster Cao will win!”

Within a short span of time, everybody caught on and began cheering wildly. With thousands of Qi citizens shouting simultaneously, it was an intimidating scene.

Revealing an unnatural expression on his face, Tian Jian kept his silence.

Lu Buwei secretly observed Xiang Shaolong's countenance and noticing that his facial expression is as calm as a mirror, he grinned: "Shaolong, your nerves are like steel."

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused.

This is exactly like a soccer team playing in an AWAY match. The host had gained the home ground advantage. If they could not withstand the sounds of booing, they would have lost the match before it even begun.

With a smile, he pointed: "If a swordsman's fighting spirit is easily affected by external factors, how can he even qualify for the duel?"

Rolling his eyes, Lu Buwei acted as if he had forgotten something and suddenly remembered it. He articulated: "I nearly forgot to tell Shaolong something. After discussing with Empress and Little Ai, I have sent my men to look for that Handan couple who raised Crown Prince. I wish to invite them to Xianyang and allow them to retire without any worries. If everything goes according to plan, they should be in Xianyang by now!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his hatred rising, knowing that Lu Buwei intentionally revealed this matter at this point in time to cause disarray to his mental state, hoping to distract and add to his worries, causing him to be unable to focus on handling Cao Qiudao's saintly swordplay. There is no other scheme as ruthless as this.

Fortunately, Zongsun Xuanhua had told him about this matter when he was testing his reaction. Otherwise, this abrupt input which tallies with his speculation may really cause him to lose his bearings.

Tian Jian became more alert upon hearing this. In the past, someone must have brought this to his attention.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and declared: "I am sure Imperial Uncle did not communicate this intention to Crown Prince."

Lu Buwei loudly chuckled: "It is Empress and my objective to give Crown Prince a surprise. That is why we kept him in the dark."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "If Imperial Uncle had consulted Crown Prince, you could have saved the effort. A long time ago, Crown Prince Zheng has already fetched that couple back to Xianyang. Regarding this matter, he kept a low profile so even Empress has no idea!" This time round, it is Lu Buwei who had a drastic change of countenance and was fidgeting with suspicions.

Among the cackling of firecrackers, the convoy drove out of the city gates.

Li Yuan, Han Chuang, Guo Kai, Xu Yizhe, Lord Longyang, Zongsun Long father and son, Min Tingzhang and a group of Qi officials were already gathered at a piece of barren land outside the city gates, forming a send-off party.

The carriage came to a halt.

Xiang Shaolong got off the carriage first and received the blessings of the

crowd. The officials of Qi would naturally avoid phrases such: A speedy victory or A successful combat.

After entertaining the crowd for a while, Xiang Shaolong rode towards Qixia College with Zongsun Xuanhua and Min Tingzhang accompanying him. Bearing lanterns to illuminate the way, eight other swordsmen dressed in warrior suits escorted them from the front and back.

With a solemn tone, Zongsun Xuanhua explained: “After escorting Great General into Qixia College, we have to return to the city at once, for the Great King has issued a strict decree according to the wishes of Master. Only when Master releases a fire arrow can we come back to Qixia College for a look.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Are you saying that there is nobody else at Qixia College beside Grandmaster Cao?”

On the other side, Min Tingzhang answered: “Exactly. According to esteemed Master, he made this special request because he is concerned that with a live audience, they would definitely cheer for him and affect Great General’s fighting spirit. Judging from the earlier scene, I guess Master’s consideration is not unwarranted.”

At this juncture, they have travelled to a ground of higher elevation. Entering their sights was Qixia College. Besides lanterns hanging at the main door and some illumination at the southeast corner, the entire area is completely dark.

With his horsewhip, Zongsun Xuanhua pointed to the lighted area that was

further away and informed: “That is Stargazing Platform. It is situated at an open square besides the East entrance and stands at three stories high. At the tip of it is a flat stage two hundred feet wide. Master will be waiting there respectfully for Great General’s arrival.”

His gaze focusing on the area that the lanterns are shining down on, Xiang Shaolong suddenly recalled Lord Longyang’s words.

If the fight didn’t turn out in his favour, he should just run for his life.

Chapter 11

Displaying All Talent

Xiang Shaolong flipped off the horse and started walking on a path leading into the snowy forest.

Recounting Cao Qiudao's innate mutant abilities, Xiang Shaolong has noticed his ability to walk energetically despite passing the age of forty. To flee away from him during a losing match is not going to be an easy task.

Furthermore, while fighting high up at the tall platform, it is not convenient to simply start running away. If Cao Quidao chooses to block the path leading down from the platform, it is as good as a cage fight.

Pondering on this, he had a brainwave. Since there is about an hour until the time of the duel, and with Cao Quidao as his senior who has a strong emphasis on status, he would definitely not be 'respectfully waiting' as per Zongsun Xuanhua's description. Therefore, he should have some time to reconnaissance the area and even arrange certain preparations.

He hurriedly injected more speed into his pace and tunneled through the forest via the footpath. A whitewashed and majestic platform that resembles Henggong Platform appeared in front of his eyes.

Since he has a plan in mind, he acted without the least hesitation and ran up the long flight of stairs on the north side of the platform within one breath.

Except for the northern edge, the remaining perimeter of the platform top was lined with stone hedges and every ten feet, a metal pole would protrude out of the hedge and would be having a lantern or a flag hanging at the top. Under the illumination of the lanterns, the platform is as bright as day.

Noting the absence of Cao Qiudao, he heaved a sigh of relief. Walking over to the stone hedge opposite the stone steps leading to the top of the platform, he removed his usual climbing rope and let it down towards the ground. Although the rope ends about ten feet away from the ground, based on his skills as a Special Forces member and with his waist hook, sliding down is a piece of cake.

Securing the other end of the rope to a section of the stone hedge, he camouflaged the area before sitting down in lotus position. Regulating his breathing, he entered a deep meditation state where both the outer world and the inner world cease to exist.

The sound of footsteps forming a peculiar rhythm jolted him out of his meditation. Opening his eyes, the first thing that came to his attention was millions of stars occupying the cloudless sky.

Xiang Shaolong was startled as he failed to notice this wondrous astronomy spectacle when he first arrived. With his mind currently cleared of distractions, he was moved by the captivating night sky.

He thought: Humans and events are ever-changing but the universe will exist forever. If everyone can recognize this fact, countless unnecessary wars can be avoided.

At this point in time, the silhouette of Cao Qiudao's massive frame gradually emerged near the stairs.

Getting on his feet, Xiang Shaolong clasped his hands together as a form of respect.

With his long hair spreading over his shoulders as usual, Cao Qiudao is now wearing a grey warrior suit with wide sleeves that resembles wings, causing his already-substantial body build to appear even more tall and intimidating.

Cao Qiudao returned the greetings: "The last round, I had a taste of Great General's excellent skills, leaving me with the fondest memories. Tonight, I implore Great General to not be stingy about displaying your skills."

Xiang Shaolong let out a long laugh: "I am someone who had succumbed to the sword of Grandmaster Cao; I am not worthy of these brave-sounding words. I beseech Grandmaster Cao to show mercy to me."

His expression as icy as the frosty snow and not revealing any traces of his emotions, Cao Qiudao calmly reasoned: "The one who has lost the fight is me instead. That fateful night, Great General is not using your most adept weapon. I have just lucky to be able to defeat Great General."

Xiang Shaolong is baffled. Judging from his tone, Cao Qiudao sounded as if he is unable to defeat Xiang Shaolong within ten strokes. Is he planning a friendly match? In a solemn manner, Cao Qiudao added: "Once my sword leaves its sheathe, I never show mercy and will fight as if it is a life and death situation. Only by fighting in this fashion can a swordsman express the

necessary respect towards his sword. Does Great General have a name for your sabre?"

Breathing in deeply and raising his heroic spirit, Xiang Shaolong retrieved Hundred Battle Sabre from his waist. With his left hand holding the scabbard and the right hand holding the sabre handle, he smiled: "The Sabre is named Hundred Battle. Awaiting instructions from Grandmaster Cao."

Staring intently at the sabre in his hand, Cao Qiudao nodded his head in succession. He plainly state: "For the past ten years, except for one man, nobody else can stand in front of me without the slightest waver. A worthy adversary is priceless. Does Great General understand the exhilaration in my heart?"

JIANG! The long sword is now in his hand.

Xiang Shaolong is confident that the man he was talking about is Guan Zhongxie's master, a superb swordsman whose name contained the word Zhai. He himself has totally forgotten the full name and wondered if their duel was also held at night. Reminded that it was a night fight, he suddenly had an inspiration and glanced at his scabbard.

Stroking the edge of the sword with a finger, Cao Qiudao alerted in a low voice: "This sword is personally forged by me and it is named: Executioner (of) General. Great General be forewarned."

With a trick up his sleeve, Xiang Shaolong remained motionless and simply requested: "Grandmaster Cao, please make the first move."

Facing the sky and laughing loudly, Cao Qiudao chuckled: “Well, someone has to attack first. Watch it!”

As the words ‘Watch it!’ rang out, the entire platform is instantly stifled with a gruesome and murderous aura. It looks like impact is imminent.

Cao Qiudao is already pressing towards him and when his boots hit the ground and produced ‘sha sha’ noises, they cumulated into an overbearing stance and it is hair-raising to the max.

Xiang Shaolong consolidated his focus and pinned all his attention on this opponent.

He acknowledged that Cao Qiudao will try to score a victory within a few strokes. As a result, repelling these ten strokes is not going to be an easy task.

The last round, he had the advantage due to his unique weapon. However, his opponent is, after all, a martial arts grandmaster. With their previous exchange, he probably comprehended his sabre play and would not be handicapped like before.

Xiang Shaolong was not complacent when he allowed Cao Qiudao to make the first move. It was because he had a brilliant scheme.

To someone like him who comes from the 21st century, a battle strategy is more important than anything else. If he can win through intellect, he would not resort to force or mindless bashing.

Cao Qiudao's footwork is awesome and full of intricacies, causing Xiang Shaolong some confusion in estimating his advancing speed and time.

Xiang Shaolong's mind became as calm as still water and entered a realm of clarity. With the absence of happiness and sorrow; past and future, his mind is now free.

Out of the blue, Cao Qiudao increased his speed and pressure. With Executioner manifesting into a huge burst of sword flashes, the actual sword suddenly materialized into a horizontal slash at the speed of lightning. It was an astounding and unmatchable strike.

Xiang Shaolong can sense the opponent's Executioner somewhat sealing all possibilities of an attack route by his Hundred Battle Sabre and Scabbard, leaving blocking as the only option.

He already had a taste of Cao Qiudao's incredible strength. If he forcefully parried the incoming blow which carried the full strength of his opponent, it would be a miracle if the centre of his palm can remain un-fractured. Needless to say, the fight will be over.

Nonetheless, he did not experience a single tinge of fear. By tilting the angle of the scabbard, the scabbard reflected the lantern's light into the eyes of Cao Qiudao.

Just like Cao Qiudao who displayed a spread of sword brilliance in order to confuse him, Xiang Shaolong is achieving the same effect by using the scabbard to reflect light.

However, the effort put in by both parties varies by a large extent.

By just twisting his hand, Xiang Shaolong has accomplished his motive.

No matter how superb is his swordsmanship, Cao Qiudao is still an ordinary man made up of flesh and blood. He is outstanding because he possess more swordfighting talent compared other people and is able to harness his potential at a deeper dimension.

As the light of the lantern fire penetrated his eyes, Cao Qiudao unconsciously squinted as his eyes could not withstand the abrupt increase in brightness compared to the level of lighting on the platform that they are used to. For a brief moment, he was blinded.

Although the spilt second is insufficient for Xiang Shaolong to overcome his enemy and gain victory, it is more than enough for him to avoid this maelstrom attack and un-blockable strike. Concurrently, he grabbed the initiative and counterattacked, destroying Cao Qiudao's strategy to attain victory within a few strokes and severely disrupting his brimming confidence at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong skirted to the weakest spot of Executioner and firstly utilized the scabbard to deflect the enemy's sword. Simultaneously, he swiftly chop down with Hundred Battle Sabre in his right hand

DANG! A loud clashing sound filled the air.

Twisting his sword and nearly causing Xiang Shaolong to lose his grip on the

scabbard, Cao Qiudao could retract his sword in time and parried his Hundred Battle Sabre.

Cao Qiudao may have successfully defended against Xiang Shaolong mountain-crushing attack but he could sense that something is amiss. He intended to shift aside to regain his momentum in order to grasp the initiative once again. But before he could react, Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battle Sabre has begun its wave of attacks.

With every sabre chop, it was perfectly matched with his amazing footwork.

The angle and strength applied in each strike is different, varying between light and heavy blows. Mainly engaging in chopping attacks, the moveset comprises of unfathomable entangling, sticky and slow variations, unleashing the full unique potential of the sabre.

Alarmingly, every blow is delivered without the slightest reservations and is fixated at maintaining the hard-won initiative. The chops are relentless and Xiang Shaolong appears to be fighting with complete disregard for his life.

This is exactly the strategy that Xiang Shaolong has chosen to employ a long time ago, banking on his youth against Cao Qiudao's matured years. He plotted to exhaust Cao Qiudao's stamina as soon as possible and prevent him from manipulating the fight within the ten strokes, which was what happened during their initial encounter.

When they first fought, Xiang Shaolong was in constant fear of Cao Quidao's aura and was at a disadvantage. This time round, he is deploying a ruse to

weaken Cao Qiudao's aura and putting him at a disadvantage instead.

For someone of Cao Qiudao's caliber, any handicap will only be temporary. When confronted by Xiang Shaolong's three successive chops, he dodged to the left and right accordingly. While receiving the fourth chop, he discovered an opening within the sabre strike and used this opportunity to counterattack. When his sword is about to pierce Xiang Shaolong, the attack was deflected by his scabbard. Continuing the momentum, the sabre formulate into a low attack, forcing Cao Qiudao to retrieve his sword to block, resulting in a stalemate.

His eyes blazing with a cold sensation, it appears that Cao Qiudao is getting angry for the first time. With his tongue and throat growling like thunder, he released a rumbling roar. Parrying the offensive scabbard, he slashed down at a vacant spot.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling bewildered at his move, Cao Qiudao's Executioner sword has changed its sword path halfway, with a top slash evolving into a frontal whisk. As if it has a life of its own, Executioner was stabbing towards his throat in a flash. This sword move is absolutely mind-blowing and simply unbelievable.

Xiang Shaolong tilted his scabbard and made use of the reflection of the gemstones on the scabbard to once again refract light into Cao Qiudao's deadly eyes.

By the time Cao Qiudao realized he is slicing empty air, Xiang Shaolong has darted to his left side. Flexing his arm, he delivered another three chops.

Cao Qiudao stepped sideways to evade and served a circle of sword flashes in return. The circumference of the circle happened to clash with Xiang Shaolong's first chop.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the centre of his palm shaking violently, acknowledging that his opponent has picked up his moves and is negating his attacks in a better way.

DANG! DANG! Xiang Shaolong has successfully chopped twice on the same spot of the opponent's sword and wanted to repeat his feat by striking the same spot a third time. However, contrary to his desire, it failed to materialize.

Nevertheless, eight strokes have been exchanged.

Only two strokes remain.

Although the fight is not turning out in his favour, Cao Qiudao's aura is as steadfast and unyielding as usual. Till now, Xiang Shaolong cannot detect any weakness that he could exploit.

Out of a sudden, Cao Qiudao began spinning on the spot. Like a porcupine with its back full of spikes, he is radiating with countless sword flashes instead as he approached Xiang Shaolong like a swirling tornado.

Xiang Shaolong instantly knew that he cannot relent from this attack, otherwise, he would certainly lose within the next two moves.

In the same instance, he discarded all his sabre skills and strategies from his mind. As Cao Qiudao is spinning at an inconceivable speed, using the scabbard to reflect light into his eyes is now inapplicable. Xiang Shaolong can only rely on his genuine ability and sharp instincts to repulse this unrivalled sword stance.

Resembling a hare and a crane crossing paths, the two men brushed past each other. In the blink of an eye, two strokes were exchanged.

A trail of blood appeared on Xiang Shaolong's left arm after Executioner carved a two-inch blood scar. Luckily, it is a minute flesh wound.

On the other hand, his Hundred Battle Sabre has neatly sliced off a portion of Cao Qiudao's flying hair due to his spinning motion. In the space between the two men, the hair gently flew in a scattered manner due to the wind and progressively landed on the ground.

Cao Qiudao was drastically stunned. Halting the fight, he laughed boisterously: "That's a fine sabre indeed. I have yet to face such an gratifying weapon."

Assuming that the duel is over, Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: "I am truly not Senior's match. Now that the ten strokes are over, we can call it a day!"

His two eyes blazing with fury, Cao Qiudao coldly grunted: "You must be joking. What ten strokes are you blabbering about? Great General is the number one enemy of our Eastern States. Do you think that I, Cao Qiudao,

will allow you leave this place alive?"

Xiang Shaolong fell into a daze as his original respect for Cao Qiudao dissipated into thin air, cursing him for being a despicable cad who does not honour his agreements and is certainly not worthy of the title of Sword Saint.

However, now is not the time for deep contemplation. With a flicker of his silhouette, Cao Qiudao has transformed into a new attacking stance and is bearing down on him expeditiously like a tsunami wave.

Xiang Shaolong maneuvered Hundred Battle Sabre around himself and barely managed to parry three sword strikes from Cao Qiudao within a fraction of a second. By the fourth strike, his arm is so badly shaken it is beginning to turn numb, causing his movement to become slightly sluggish. He therefore tried to use the scabbard in his left hand to block, fighting for a break to catch his breath. Unexpectedly, his reaction coincides with Cao Qiudao's anticipation. By Cao Qiudao twisting his sword to manifest an entangling move and coupled with the additional impact from his body making a half turn, Xiang Shaolong's injured left arm could no longer maintain its grip on the scabbard. The scabbard flew out of his hand and landed somewhere behind him.

In this life and death scenario, Xiang Shaolong unlocked his adrenaline and launched a downward slash, forcefully clashing with Cao Qiudao's sword that was making a horizontal stab at his unguarded left arm.

DANG! The clashing sound rang out in their ears. Cao Qiudao did not envisage Xiang Shaolong to execute this bizarre move in the face of danger and helplessly retreated.

He let out a long laughter: “Without the scabbard, let’s see what other tricks do you have in your bag?”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it is now either do or die. If he allows Cao Qiudao to unveil another string of attacks and grab the initiative, he would perish on this platform within the next ten strokes.

Without the slightest delay, he advanced so rapidly towards Cao Qiudao that his shadow could barely form a complete outline. In the same breath, he switched from a one-hand grip to a two-hand grip. Raising the sabre high above his head and with a dance-like footwork, he swiftly positioned a chop at the head of Cao Qiudao.

Cao Qiudao halted his retreat and icily snorted: “You are asking for death!” As he was brandishing his sword and leaning forward, Xiang Shaolong unpredictably leaped up and gathered all his strength, chopping down with all his might.

With gravity on his side and a two-hand grip on the sabre, his stance is invincible and the strength behind this blow is way above his usual limit.

Swishing through the air, Hundred Battle Sabre was humming a piercing sabre whistle that screeched through the atmosphere.

With Cao Qiudao’s ability, he could easily retreat and avoid the onslaught. But this would injure his ego and only serve to increase Xiang Shaolong’s dominating aura. Furthermore, it would be a huge challenge to suppress the increase in aura.

Gnashing his teeth, Cao Qiudao leapt up as well to receive the impact with his sword.

Two bright and crisp clashing sounds reverberate and echoed throughout the mountains and valleys, ringing at every corner of Qixia College.

Even Lu Buwei and company who are watching the fight from the top of the city wall a far distance away could hear them.

As a matter of fact, whenever the two men exchanged blows, the sounds of clashing between the sword and the sabre could be faintly discerned but none of the sounds are as clear and loud as these two.

The two men had switched places.

The panting noises of Cao Qiudao were picked up by Xiang Shaolong's ears.

Xiang Shaolong's weakening strategy is finally taking effect. Twirling around with Hundred Battle Sabre firmly grasped in his hands, he employed a rotating momentum and supplemented additional strength from his waist, ferociously discharging a slanted slash at Cao Qiudao from his left shoulder.

Judging from his countenance, Cao Qiudao is as emotionless as ever.

Flourishing his sword to counter the sabre strike head on, he shifted to one side to reestablish his footing.

Beyond his anticipation, Xiang Shaolong is already trailing him like a shadow and powered a backhand thrust towards his back.

Cao Qiudao cannot imagine Xiang Shaolong to be capable of such a flabbergasting switch in stance. Demonstrating traces of perturbation for the first time, he was forced to retrieve his sword in order to deflect Hundred Battle Sabre.

Gaining the upper hand, Xiang Shaolong was devoid of mercy. Among his wild roars, his hands ceaselessly performed one strike after another, with every strike beginning from high above his head and ending in either a straight chop or a side slash. Despite knowing that Cao Qiudao is impregnable, at least he could force him into a purely defensive position.

DING! DANG! The sounds of clashing consistently invaded his eardrums.

Although Cao Qiudao is physically stronger than Xiang Shaolong, the gap between their strength is marginal. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is now using both his hands to wield the sabre. Besides the strength of his wrists and arms, the strength of his waist was added as well and his waist strength alone formed the main bulk of the force. Additionally, every attack is a downwards hack from the top. Simply put, every hit carries the impact of a devastating and unstoppable avalanche, compelling Cao Qiudao to keep stepping back with each encounter.

The best part is, Xiang Shaolong intentionally kept a distance away from him. Ten strokes later, at least six strokes were inflicted near the tip of his sword, which also happens to be the weakest part of the sword.

This highlights the wisdom of Xiang Shaolong.

In terms of sword moves and intricacies, he is way below Cao Qiudao.

By engaging in wide hacks and giant chops, he is able to harness the advantages of the sabre while exposing the vulnerability of the sword.

Overwhelmed by the sabre strikes, Cao Qiudao could only maintain his defensive role.

But this strategy cannot be sustained in the long run.

Initially, every hit is able to force Cao Qiudao to take one step back but Cao Qiudao gradually improvise his defenses and regained his stability. It wasn't too long before Xiang Shaolong had to exert additional strength in order to push him back by another step.

With this in mind, Xiang Shaolong swiftly dealt three successive and all-out strikes when he noticed that Cao Qiudao is no longer retreating and is readying himself for a counterattack.

TING! A new sound is heard.

Executioner (of) General sword cannot withstand the blitzkrieg and a two-inch section of the sword tip finally broke off.

Having suffered immensely at Xiang Shaolong's continuous rampage, Cao Qiudao's enormous frame was vibrating aggressively. Erupting into a raging howl, he exercised his sword in a wild flurry of stabs. Forgetting that his sword tip was gone, even his furthest pierce was only able to touch the

surface of Xiang Shaolong's shirt at the chest area, allowing Xiang Shaolong to escape death by the smallest of margins.

Feeling exhausted too, Xiang Shaolong quickly retreated and created a distance of thirty feet between the two of them. Behind him, his escape rope is merely five feet away.

Lowering his head and scrutinizing his precious sword, Cao Qiudao shook his head and sighed: "Even with a broken sword, it is good enough to take your life."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that due to his earlier frenzy, he has expended most of his energy and cannot recover his earlier vitality.

Of course he would not display his weakness on his face. Taking a deep breath, Xiang Shaolong warned: "Grandmaster Cao, please reconsider. Earlier, it is not impossible for me to conclude the fight with a lose-lose double KO scenario."

Cao Qiudao plainly remarked: "Using my life in exchange for Great General's life is a beneficial bargain."

Xiang Shaolong hinted with sarcasm: "But the decision lies with me, not Grandmaster Cao."

Cao Qiudao angrily grunted once and frostily laughed: "Do you think you can use mere words to agitate me? Let's see what else are you capable of."

Lifting his tip-less sword, he swings it around in a figure of eight and synchronously stepped forward, pressing towards Xiang Shaolong.

Flaunting his sabre and pointing it at Cao Qiudao, Xiang Shaolong regulated his breathing as he stepped further back.

As one man advances and the other man retreats, in the blink of an eye, Xiang Shaolong has arrived at the edge of the stone hedge.

Xiang Shaolong vociferously roared: "Hold it!"

Cao Qiudao was astounded: "What do you want?"

Cupping his hands and the sabre in front of him, Xiang Shaolong paid his respects: "Many thanks for Grandmaster Cao's pointers. Little Brother has to go."

Realizing his intention, Cao Qiudao wielded his sword and dashed forward.

With a somersault, Xiang Shaolong disappeared beyond the stone ledge.

Chapter 12

Safely Back At Xianyang

The minute Xiang Shaolong touched the ground, he immediately plastered himself to a dark corner of the wall. He could hear Cao Qiudao's faint footsteps, guessing that he must have blown his top and is descending the stairs in pursuit.

Scanning his surroundings, he caught sight of his Hundred Battle Scabbard lying a short distance away from his feet. Hastily picking it up and tying the sabre to his back, he exerted a huge amount of energy by climbing back to the top of the platform via the grappling rope.

Cao Qiudao is obviously no longer on top of the platform.

Prostrating on the floor, Xiang peeped down and observed Cao Qiudao running past the bottom of the platform. At the same time, he detected rustling of leaves and branches on his right and left, a sure sign of ambush. His assassins must be in a state of confusion after failing to discover his whereabouts.

He counted his blessings for the close shave. If he had logically walked away from the grappling rope, he would have stepped right into their trap.

His plan to return back to Stargazing Platform is a brilliant stratagem. Not only can he spy on the enemy deployment, he could take a breather and

bandage his wound.

Minutes later, he abseiled down the southeastern corner of Stargazing Platform. Recovering his grappling hook and rope, he borrowed the cover of the vegetation and scampered to the south wall of Qixia College.

He is well versed with the surrounding terrain of Qixia College and is aware that a thick forest exists beyond the wall. The forest provides a favourable condition for his getaway.

By now, he has recuperated some of his stamina. While it is insufficient for a proper fight, it is more than enough for him to make his escape

Somersaulting over the high wall, he used this opportunity to shoot the fire arrow that was meant to signal Li Yuan to him.

Subsequently, he raced at full speed towards the predetermined point where Xiao Yuetan had left the snowboard.

This is a distraction ploy, intending to lure the enemy to the place where the arrow was fired. He wanted to mislead the enemy into believing that he was injured and immobile, and was forced to ask for reinforcements.

Running nonstop for a hundred feet, his knees suddenly buckled and Xiang Shaolong fell flat on his face.

It turned out that the ground is still covered with snow that runs a few feet deep, making it extremely arduous to walk. Though Xiang Shaolong is fitter

than the average man, he just fought a strenuous duel and suffered an injury with major loss of blood a week ago. Unable to catch his breath, he was seeing stars for a few seconds before nearly blacking out.

The freezing snow splattered on his face reignited his senses. Glancing around, he saw total darkness everywhere.

Fortunately, far behind him, he could decipher the lantern light from Stargazing Platform. Like a lost sailor who has found his guiding lighthouse, he was pointed to the right direction.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to climb back to his feet and staggered along the snow to a nearby bush. Diving into the clump of greenery, he collapsed and sat down to rest.

The starry night is simply enchanting but Xiang Shaolong is in a state of panic. With his worn out and tired body, there is no room for appreciating these wonders.

Closing his eyes, he resisted the urge to pass out due to a lack of oxygen. Gritting his teeth, he strained to stay awake.

After much difficulty, he managed to harmonize his breathing. But when he opened his eyes, he instantly knew that he is in trouble.

Under the illumination of the bright moon and the twinkling stars, the footprints left by his staggering is completely visible. It was truly shocking to see the footprints accurately leading to his present location, clearly

identifying his hideout to his pursuers.

At this juncture, he could barely keep himself from fainting. Standing up is totally out of the question.

Despite the chilling winter season, his entire body is covered with sweat.

His ears picked up the sound of footsteps approaching.

More than ten human silhouettes emerged at the edge of the dense forest several feet away. Moving their feet high and low to trespass the deep snow, they are advancing towards him.

By simply following his footprints, they can walk straight to his hiding spot.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it is game over for him as he watched the enemies come closer and closer while there is nothing he can do.

By just travelling another three hundred feet through a sparse forest, he would be able to reach the hill where the snowboard is hidden.

It is truly excruciating to lose at the edge of victory.

Even if he could force himself to start walking, the enemies would quickly catch up due to his feeble legs. He would rather reserve his strength to take out as many assassins as he could to vent the anger in his heart. With this notion, he untied the two flying daggers around his calf and hid them in his hands.

If not for the enemies' refusal to light a torch, they would have seen him by now.

The sound of hoof beats suddenly arose.

The assailants were taken aback.

A lone rider appeared out of nowhere and loudly bellowed: "Who are you people?"

Recognizing Cao Qiudao's voice, Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. Keeping his flying daggers, he tried standing up.

With Zerk! Zerk! sounds, the group of attackers unexpectedly started to shoot arrows at Cao Qiudao.

Cao Qiudao let out an angry snarl and unleashed a flurry of sword brilliance. Broken arrows rained down around him, demonstrating their uselessness against his skills.

Xiang Shaolong finally managed to regain his foothold and began jogging towards his prize.

Behind him, tragic cries filled the skies. Apparently, an incensed Cao Qiudao has embarked on a killing spree.

Baffled by his sudden burst of energy, Xiang Shaolong actually made it into the forest before collapsing again.

Noting the sounds of running and galloping all jumbled up, Xiang Shaolong deduced that the ambushers are running their lives in multiple directions.

Xiang Shaolong can finally put his mind at ease, thinking that with the enemy swordsmen running all over the place and leaving their footprints, his own 'virgin footprints' would not be as obvious as before. Lying prone on the ground for some time, he slowly got back on his feet before proceeding forward once again.

Out of the blue, hoof beats can be heard approaching towards his back.

Petrified, Xiang Shaolong squatted down behind a tree.

Within the sparse forest, it is pitch dark and it is not as open as the space outside. There is no fear of someone noticing his footprints.

It appears that in his rush, Cao Qiudao must have forgotten to bring his fire stick. Otherwise, now would be a good time to light a branch or a torch to see his way.

Xiang Shaolong dare not breathe loudly because in this instance, Cao Qiudao has arrived at the other side of the tree where he is hiding. Riding a horse, Cao Qiudao was panting heavily.

If this Sword Saint had travelled on foot instead of riding a horse, he would have collapsed beside the tree.

CHA!

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself, realizing that he had made a wrong guess, for this is the terrifying sound of the lighting of a fire stick.

Xiang Shaolong dared not waver. Pulling out a flying dagger, he leapt out and threw it towards the neck of Cao Qiudao's horse.

The horse uncontrollably neighed and broke out into a frenzy of jumps, throwing Cao Qiudao off its back. The fire stick flew out of his grasp and landed somewhere far away as the forest was enveloped in darkness once again.

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "You are trapped! Watch out for my flying dagger!" Sounds of a person rolling on the forest ground can be heard as a disconcerted Cao Qiudao scrambled to find a hiding place.

Aware that his ruse has succeeded, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly summoned his remaining energy and climbed towards his targeted hill as quietly as he can.

In terms of his stealth ninja skills, even ten Cao Qiudaos cannot match his agility.

Gradually recovering his strength, Xiang Shaolong has left the sparse forest and is presently scaling the eastern face of the slope. When he was about to reach the summit, Cao Qiudao's angry howls reverberated behind him.

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated. Picking up a ten kg rock that happened to be beside him, he weakly threw it towards Cao Qiudao who was hot in pursuit.

After flying for five feet, the rock simply landed on the slope and began rolling down.

Cao Qiudao dodged to a side and successfully avoided the rock. However, due to the wet and slippery slope, he stumbled and lost his balance. Rolling straight to the bottom of the slope, he was a pathetic sight.

Xiang Shaolong thought: It is high time you have a taste of dirt on your face. Continuing his ascent, he barely reached the top when a pair of beautifully crafted snowboard and snow skis entered his sight. Lying beside them is a neat and full backpack.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong dedicated his thanks to Xiao Yuetan and Heaven. Using all his muscles, he sprinted to his resources and swiftly inserted his feet into the leg openings that Xiao Yuetan had fashioned with thick rope. It felt as if he was putting on a pair of tight fitting boots.

As Xiang Shaolong was slinging the haversack over his back, Cao Qiudao happened to appear behind him and he thundered: "Where do you think you are going?"

Standing up, Xiang Shaolong cheerfully laughed: "Back to Xianyang of course! Little Old Fella Qiudao, let's never meet again!"

Cao Qiudao is now only ten feet away from him. Arching his body and powerfully digging the ski pole into the snow, Xiang Shaolong propelled himself off the hilltop and zoomed down the slope like a gust of wind. When he turned his head back, he saw Cao Qiudao's massive frame standing in a

daze at the top of the slope, losing all his desire to continue the chase.

Xiang Shaolong kept skiing as the wind whistled in his ears. In a matter of seconds, he is miles apart from the abandoned Cao Qiudao who is still surrounded by darkness.

In his heart, he was deliriously happy. Although his body is aching all over, his heart was singing a song that was either composed by Xie Ziyuan or Feng Fei, which he could not specifically recall.

Except for Xianyang, he does not hold any responsibilities towards anything or anyone.

Beneath the brightening sky, Xiang Shaolong bent over a stream and swallowed several mouthfuls of water. Feeling much better, he sat down on a huge boulder beside the stream and opened up the backpack that Xiao Yuetan had prepared for him, wishing to obtain some food to fill his empty stomach.

Inside the backpack was a map with directions to Zhongmou and some money for travelling expenses. There were also food, clothing, medicine for wounds, fire starters, etc, showcasing Xiao Yuetan's thorough thinking in packing everything that he would need on this journey.

While opening the map, a roll of parchment was discovered. The parchment is filled with words and it was unsigned. It read: By the time Shaolong reads this letter, you should have defeated Cao Qiudao and safely left the boundaries of Lin Zi. Elder Brother has a secret that I can only reveal at this

point in time. The ten strokes agreement between Shaolong and Cao Qiudao is something that I made up; that letter never reached Cao Qiudao. If not for this ploy, Shaolong would not dare to fight. If you chose to flee and skip the duel, the damage to your reputation is far worse than losing your life at the hands of Cao Qiudao. Shaolong would have lost the most critical factor in the campaign against Lu Buwei: Your confidence. In the heart of Crown Prince, you would no longer be the hero who chooses death over injustice. Of course Shaolong would not hold it against me if you are able to read this letter. Otherwise, there is nothing worth saying. Elder Brother would rather see you die under Cao Qiudao's sword than to be labeled as a coward and a weakling. See you soon.

Reading the letter, his whole head turned numb, not knowing whether to find it amusing or petrifying.

Actually, several loopholes have been spotted. For example, Xiao Yuetan is constantly reminding himself that Cao Qiudao may dishonor the ten-stroke agreement whenever they talked about it. In addition, he would be having a peculiar expression on his face.

It can be considered that Xiao Yuetan is using Xiang Shaolong's life as a gambling chip. Fortunately, he won.

Although he did not really defeat Cao Qiudao, at least he didn't lose the fight too.

Even Cao Qiudao had to admit that it is possible for them to end up in a double KO scenario.

Filling up his tummy, he took a nap before speeding along the stream in a southwesterly direction.

In the evening, he found himself a decent cave and started a fire to keep himself warm. After a good night's sleep, he would continue his journey the next morning. This soon became a standard routine and five days later, Xiang Shaolong found himself in the territory of Wei en route to Zhongmou.

At this juncture, he has arrived at the northern shore of the Yellow River where the river water is beginning to thaw. In his heart, he knew that by sailing up north the river, he would reach Zhongmou in a day's time.

Presently, his greatest concern is that Teng Yi and the others have retreated from Zhongmou. If this is true, he would have to continue his arduous journey to Xianyang itself and he may run out of provisions.

The fact is that snow is melting around him, leading to extreme temperatures that he finds unbearable despite piling on all his clothes. A person with a weaker constitution would surely fall ill.

In the middle of his worrying, three large ships were seen sailing against the sunset.

An agitated Xiang Shaolong prone himself behind a massive boulder and eyed the ship.

After identifying the flag on the main ship, Xiang Shaolong leapt out with delight. Standing on the most prominent rock he could find, he lighted his

flare and began signaling the ship with Qin's military signal.

The Qin sailors on board the ship were instantly alerted and started crowding at the bow while shouting at him.

The three ships sluggishly drew closer to a part of the muddy riverbank that has a gentler gradient.

Xiang Shaolong was mad with joy, feeling like a wanderer who is seeing his relatives again after leaving his household since he was a kid. Kicking the snowboard away and discarding his ski poles, he ran towards the shore like a lunatic.

The first of the colossal ships is nearly reaching the shore. More than ten planks were lowered and pushed against the bank to prevent collision.

A crisp and powerful voice rang out from afar: "Shaolong, Shaolong, it is us!"

Xiang Shaolong was so shaken he fell flat on his face; he could recognize Teng Yi's familiar voice.

Beyond his wildest imagination, his ears also picked up the shrieking and crying sounds of Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi. Lord Changping is also shouting his name out loud.

An exhausted Xiang Shaolong kept his face buried in the mud. He was finally home.

Turning back, the enormous ships sailed against the current. In the main hall of the ship's hull, Xiang Shaolong has changed into a new set of clothes and is surrounded by everyone like a superstar celebrity.

Due to their pining for him, Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi have grown thinner. Till now, they are still smiling among their tear-ing, a picture of both happiness and sorrow.

Sipping the hot tea served by his wives, Xiang Shaolong faced Teng Yi and Lord Changping, articulating: "I finally understood the meaning of: Worlds apart. It did cross my mind that I would never see you guys again."

Throwing herself into his bosom, Zhao Zhi wept even harder, frightening Xiang Shaolong into consoling her with kind words.

Ji Yanran had better self-control than Zhao Zhi and had recomposed herself by now. In a melancholic tone, she updated: "We did consider committing suicide to prove our dedication to you. Fortunately, we heard about your arrival in Lin Zi and the entire family went crazy with delight. Yanran and Sister Qing cast aside our duties and seek an audience with Crown Prince, beseeching him to send a force to fetch you from Qi..." A restless Lord Changping interrupted: "The Crown Prince is more anxious than anyone else and immediately commanded Little Brother to drop everything at hand and depart for Lin Zi without delay. To our anguish, the trip was postponed because the river had turned into ice. Actually, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Otherwise, we may have missed each other and it would be a wasted trip."

Teng Yi added: “Although we received the report from Jing Village, there was still no sign of Third Brother and we feared for your safety.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “How are the others doing?”

Lord Changping replied: “We have come to an agreement with Zhao and our forces have retreated from Zhongmou. Presently, Jing Jun and Huan Qi are holding the fort at Tunliu. Shaolong’s army has quelled the chaos caused by Pu Hu and ruffled the feathers of Zhao. Your accomplishments are admirable.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If my accomplishments are truly admirable, Zhou Liang and my other brothers need not die in a foreign land.”

Teng Yi reasoned in a deep voice: “Wars are made this way. Regardless of victory or defeat, injury and death is inevitable. Third Brother need not blame yourself. Aye, Li Mu is really formidable.”

Lord Changping wondered: “Didn’t Lu Buwei travel to Lin Zi as well? He probably did not know you were there too.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “The exact opposite is true. Not only did we drink wine at the same table, he even personally escorted me to my duel with Cao Qiudao.”

The crowd went hysterical: “What?!”

Xiang Shaolong gave a detailed description of what transpired in Lin Zi,

causing everybody present to be tongue tied and shocked beyond their senses.

Of course he did not divulge anything about Xiao Pan's identity crisis.

Her curiosity aroused by his story, Zhao Zhi forgot to cry but her body is still plastered to his chest. When she heard about the part that Shan Rou has settled down, she sat up and noisily wailed: "Why would Sister Rou get married and keep us in the dark?"

Xiang Shaolong quickly explained that Xie Ziyuan is an ideal partner and Shan Rou had made an excellent choice. However, Zhao Zhi remained doubtful.

Ji Yanran was inquired: "You didn't see Godfather around? He must have..."

Xiang Shaolong continued telling his amazing story with all the twists and turns. Once completed, he stretched his back and decided: "For the time being, all I wish for is a good night's rest. I hope to wake up and find myself already in Xianyang."

Xiang Shaolong has changed into a military uniform and is standing at the bow of the ship. Standing beside him are Lord Changping, Teng Yi and Jing Jun who joined them on the way back.

From afar, nearly a hundred battleships were lined alongside the river in an awe-inspiring formation.

Two hours later, they will dock at Xianyang.

The white, snow-covered environment is gradually being replaced by signs of the spring's arrival.

The fluttering clouds, the raging waters, the lush greenery of willow trees that lined the two sides of the shore.

Staring intently at a long-tailed blue bird that was eventually startled by his passing ship, he recalled the months of living life as a fugitive, which is in total contrast to his current state. With the limitless ocean and sky for him to roam free, he feels like an un-caged bird.

The only issue plaguing him is: What is the outcome of Xiao Pan's identity crisis?

Xiang Shaolong used this break to question: "Recently, are there any major developments?"

Lord Changping answered: "The King of Han just passed away and he is succeeded by Prince An, who subsequently sent a peace emissary to us. In return, Crown Prince has asked Han's King An for Han Fei to come over to Qin. Han's King An has yet to give us a reply."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Crown Prince has always shown his appreciation for Brother Han Fei's theories of governance. If Brother Han Fei can put his talents to good use in Qin, that would be a good thing."

Ji Yanran sighed with a breath instead but kept her silence.

Xiang Shaolong pressed him for more details. Lord Changping suppressed his voice and added: "The Empress favours Lao Ai even more than before and promoted him to become Marquis Changxin. After the promotion, Lao Ai shares the same rank and salary as Lu Buwei, causing him to behave in an arrogant and insufferable manner."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: This is the year of Xiao Pan's coronation and it will mark the end of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. It is just too bad that the two of them have no idea about what's coming.

Quietly pondering on this, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Zhu Ji and Lao Ai are even closer to each other because of two reasons.

Firstly, Zhu Ji is suspecting that Xiao Pan is not her real son; secondly, she thought Xiang Shaolong is dead.

Be it mentally or biologically, Zhu Ji does require a man to fulfill her needs.

Jing Jun jested: "Now that Third Brother is returning to Xianyang in one piece, I bet some people will be pretty disappointed."

Zhao Zhi cheerfully added: "Hubby has been away for nearly two years. You would be surprised at how much Bao'er has grown!"

Ji Yanran joyfully chirped: "If not for Bao'er, Sister Wu would surely join our expedition. Little Zhen and Little Feng are unable to come along too and because of this, they did weep for several days."

Xiang Shaolong made enquiries about Wang Jian.

Lord Changping whispered: "Let's talk about it after meeting Crown Prince!"

As Xiang Shalong glanced at Lord Changping with astonishment, the latter winked at him, forcing Xiang Shaolong to bear with the temporary ignorance.

Xiang Shaolong longingly exclaimed: "I am finally home!"

Xiao Pan has received news of his homecoming and personally left the city to welcome him.

This future Qin Shihuang is finally a grown man and even kept a short beard. With a broad chest and thick back, his every gesture carries the aura of an earth-shattering Emperor. At his first glance, Xiang Shaolong had the impression that he is facing a total stranger.

Lord Changwen, Li Si, Guan Zhongxie, Wu Tingfang, Qin Qing and several high-ranking officials are in full attendance, leading to a lively and grand atmosphere. Lao Ai, however, is missing.

Among the booming drums, cackling of firecrackers and music playing, Xiang Shaolong disembarked his ship and step onto shore under the escort of his companions.

Taking the lead, Xiao Pan stepped out and supported Xiang Shaolong who had kneeled down to pay his respects. Scrutinizing his skinny complexion, he sighed: "It has been hard on Great General!"

Within Xiang Shaolong arose a bizarre feeling; it is as if their previous intimacy is gone with the wind.

Besides Xiao Pan not displaying sufficient agitation at seeing him again after so long, Xiao Pan's eyes seemed to be concealing something he could not decipher.

The other officials separately came up to offer their congratulations.

Without any reservations, Wu Tingfang leapt into his bosom. Qin Qing obviously could not do the same thing in front of the public. However, her eyes are blazing with passion, setting Xiang Shaolong's heart aflame.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong are riding side by side, receiving the cheers of Qin citizens who have lined up both sides of the street to welcome him. Xiao Pan grinned: "After we received news of Great General's disappearance, every household began praying to Heaven, wishing for Great General's safety and successful return. Their wishes have finally come true."

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to tell him about Lu Buwei's grand scheme but realizes that it is inappropriate to discuss this top secret at this point in time. Holding back his words, he questioned instead: "Is Lu Buwei back?"

Xiao Pan icily smiled: "Of course he must rush back to Xianyang before Great General. Great General's duel at Lin Zi is truly spectacular and has achieved the utmost glory for our Great Qin. After you left, Cao Qiudao personally begged the King of Qi for pardon, admitting that he is unable to overcome you. Is Great General aware that once the King of Qi hears about this, he was

so upset he fell sick that very day.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Since Lu Buwei is back, then... Aye, Let’s continue talking in the palace!”

The corner of his mouth revealing a deep and unfathomable smirk, Xiao Pan waved in response to the crowd’s cheering as he plainly state: “Everything is under my control; let’s talk later!”

Xiang Shaolong is having that bizarre sensation once again.

In a matter of two years, Xiao Pan’s prowess has increased significantly and is even more unpredictable. It is totally opposite from the past when he was a kid and he would plead ‘Master, save me’.

Back in the palace, they conducted a military parade inspection at the main square before Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan retreated to the Imperial Study for a secret discussion.

When the topic of Handan’s Zhang couple surfaced, Xiao Pan’s royal eyes glowed chillingly as he cursed: “How dare he. This traitor actually had the audacity to leak this information to outsiders. Even if he dies ten thousand times, he cannot atone for this crime.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Crown Prince is behaving as if you are prepared for this.”

Xiao Pan sniggered: “Lest you forget, I have planted Mao Jiao the spy within

Traitor Lao's camp. His every move cannot escape my detection."

Feeling an enormous weight lifted off his shoulders, Xiang Shaolong was elated: "Crown Prince must have executed some countermeasures."

Xiao Pan proudly declared: "If I sent my men to Handan after receiving this information, it would be too late. Fortunately, years ago, I did consider this issue and have resolved it."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sense of overwhelming fear. In a deep voice, he questioned: "Why didn't Crown Prince tell me about it?"

Avoiding his stare, Xiao Pan simply brushed off: "Back then, Great General was far away from Qin and it must have slipped my mind."

Xiang Shaolong continued to probe: "How did Crown Prince deal with that couple?"

Showing signs of impatience, Xiao Pan remarked: "Of course I rewarded them with plenty of money and relocated them to another place, preventing anyone else from finding them."

Xiang Shaolong's sixth sense told him that Xiao Pan is lying but if he continues to pursue the matter, it would only increase the unhappiness between the two of them. Thus, he kept quiet.

It soon led to an awkward silence.

After some time, Xiao Pan broke the silence and sighed with a breath: "Is Master upset?"

This 'long-awaited' word 'master' caused Xiang Shaolong's heart to soften. With considerable agitation, he expressed: "You have changed a lot."

With his dominating and sharp eyes turning to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan looked at him in the eyes briefly before nodding: "I cannot afford to remain the same. To maintain my seat on this throne, I definitely must make the change. But to Great General, I am always a kid."

Pausing, he asked after much difficulty: "Except for Great General, is there anyone else who knows about this secret of mine?"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that he has always wanted to ask this question but could only ask given the present circumstances.

After a quick thought, he replied: "Except for Tingfang, not a third person knows about this."

Of course he would not reveal Teng Yi's awareness.

Exhaling a breath of air, Xiao Pan leaned back on his throne. Raising his head and staring at the ceiling beams, he gently painted: "Bad news travel faster than good news. With rumours flying all over the place, they better not let me hear about it. Otherwise, not only will I kill him regardless of his status, I will also exterminate his clan. Let's see who else would dare to bring this up. Hng, Lu Buwei, Lao Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong was greatly shocked. Although these words are not directed at him, it felt like Xiao Pan is hinting him, warning him not to disclose his secret to a third party. He instantly felt uneasy.

Without further explaining himself, Xiao Pan leaned forward and whispered: "I have secretly summoned Wang Jian back. He should arrive in Xianyang within two months."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "You meant you did not consult Empress about this?"

His eyes flashing with a chilling aura, Xiao Pan spat with disgust: "Since she no longer regards me as her son, why should I bother to consult her. At Yongdu, she behaves without any inhibitions and her relationship with Lao Ai is now an open secret. Under the skies, who is not regarding this as a joke? It has brought countless shame to our Great Qin."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he hates Zhu Ji for divulging the whereabouts of the Zhang couple. He sighed with a breath: "Crown Prince should remember what you have promised me."

He was referring to the promise that Xiao Pan would not harm Zhu Ji no matter what happens.

An incensed Xiao Pan glared at him and indignantly demanded: "Up till now, Great General is still speaking up for her?"

His own eyes brimming with an icy aura, Xiang Shaolong stared back at him

and insisted: "Yes. After all, she did love you and supported you wholeheartedly and you also treated her as your real mother. If you had put yourself in her shoes, you should understand that the things she does do not benefit her at all. She is simply being human."

Xiao Pan appears to be slightly afraid of him and shifted his gaze away to the reports and documents that were piled on his desk. He quizzed: "Most of the reports here are more or less related to Zhengguo Canal. Recently, I received news, saying that Zhengguo was in fact sent by the King of Han. What is Great General's opinion on this?"

Noting that Xiao Pan had deliberately changed the topic and refused to engage him with Zhu Ji's affairs, Xiang Shaolong suppressed his anger and replied in a deep voice: "Your subordinate is very tired and wishes to return home for a rest."

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath and bitterly smiled: "Grand Tutor is offended. There are many things I do not wish to do but at the back of my mind, I knew I had to do it. Grand Tutor should also try putting yourself in my shoes."

By using another official title to address Xiang Shaolong, he immediately increased the intimacy between the two of them.

His anger slightly mellowing, Xiang Shaolong formally asserted: "This July, Crown Prince will officially be crowned King. By then, all power would lay in your hands and Empress can no longer interfere with your decisions."

Sinking his face down, Xiao Pan slowly pronounced one word at a time: "Does

Great General knows that that slut has given her seal of authority to Lao Ai, allowing him to use it at his disposal, causing me endless nights of trepidation?"

Xiao Pan has really transformed into a different person and his relationship with Zhu Ji is obviously beyond repair.

Otherwise, why would he use the term slut to describe her, stunning Xiang Shaolong speechless.

PONG! Slamming his wide and thick palm heavily on the table, Xiao Pan gritted his teeth and cursed: "That slut has bore two bastards for Lao Ai. One is named Lao Zheng and the other is named Lao Long. What does Great General think about this? If not for Traitor Lao and Lu Buwei in cahoots and posing a formidable threat, I would have tore him to pieces way before July."

Pausing for a while, Xiao Pan's furious expression slowly subsided. With mock amusement, he laughed: "Does Great General know that Lao Ai is labeling himself as my 'fake father' and even commented that my, this 'fake son', days are numbered and the coronation will not be mine but his. Ha. This fool can even dream with his eyes open. I can't wait to witness his terrifying demise."

Xiao Pan may be laughing as he articulated these words but the genuine hatred in his heart is what Xiang Shaolong finds bone-chilling.

Out of the blue, he felt extremely exhausted. Dealing with Xiao Pan is much more draining than dealing with Lu Buwei. How was he to know that this would happen after he decided to bring Xiao Pan to Xianyang?